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Magazine

BRONZE RIDER

by Rex Whitechurch

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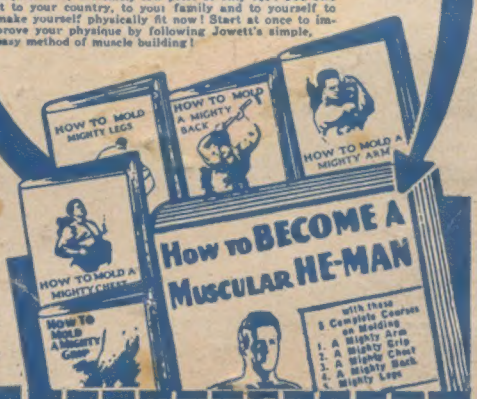
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COMPLETE COWBOY NOVEL Magazine

Volume 9, Number 4

April - May, 1950

BRAND NEW BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

Bronze Rider

by Rex Whitechurch . . . 8

Hated and hunted, Bruce Lescott finds himself siding this woman called the Yellow-Haired Panther. Yet, at the same time, he cannot seem to escape crossing trails with the U. S. army officer who is trailing her — and helping Captain Charley Curtis out of death-traps. And once Curtis finds out who Lescott really is . . .

Plus

FIGHTING NEWSPAPER (True Fact Feature) ..... John Lackland 89

DON'T BET ON WIMMIN! .. Ward Raymond 95

Sheriff Dingle figures that it's time to quit now that he's ahead of the game, only . . .

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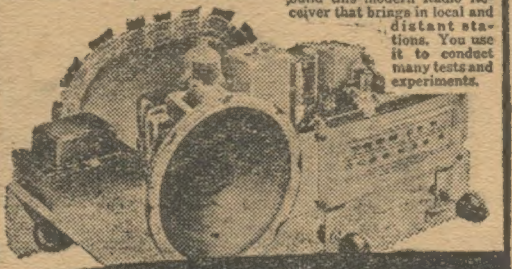

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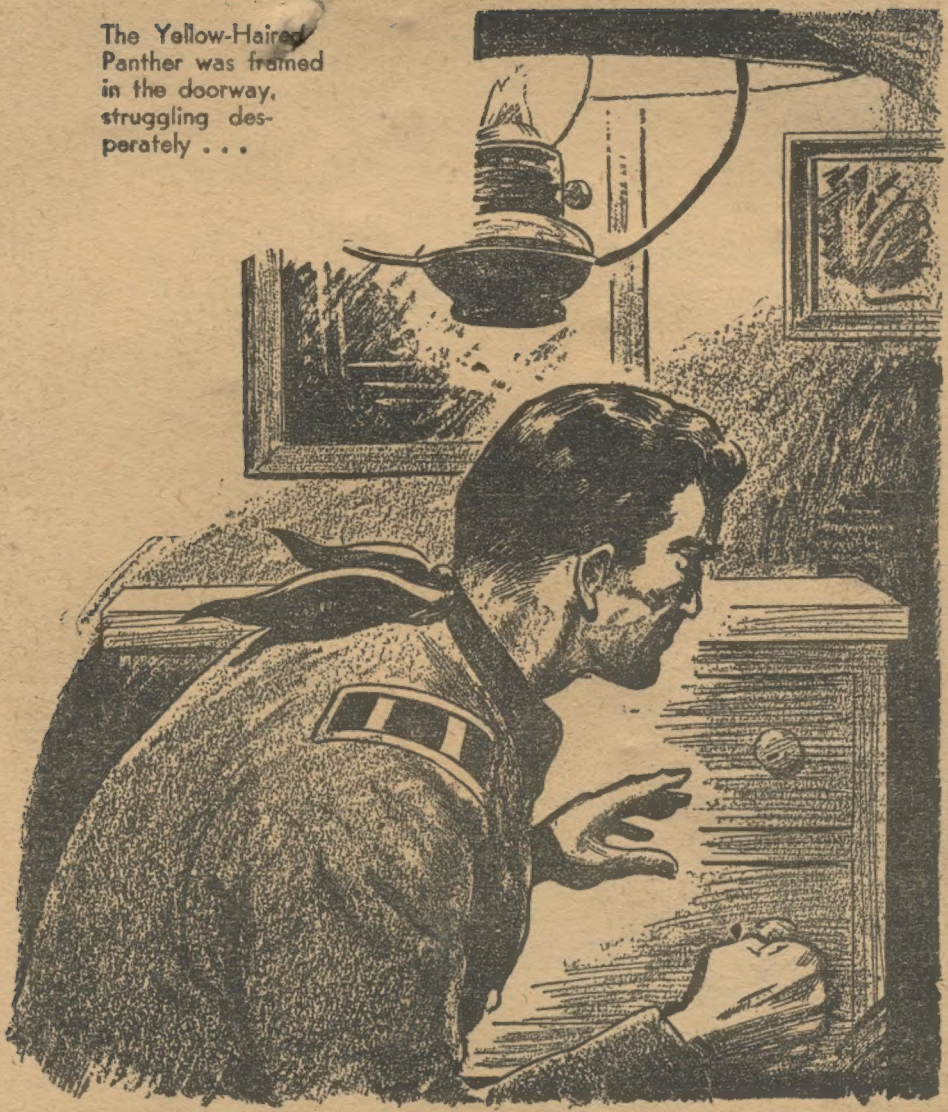


The Yellow-Haired Panther was framed in the doorway, struggling desperately . . .

BRONZE RIDER

Dynamic New Book-Length Novel

by Rex Whitechurch

A fugitive himself, haunted by a past he could not blot out, Bruce Lescott's sympathies naturally ran with this woman who had been forced into outlawry, the woman they called the Yellow-Haired Panther. Yet, he found himself befriending the U. S. army officer who trailed her.

HE HAD BEEN riding all day and he was saddle worn. But he was unable to rest and not particularly anxious to find a bed in a hotel just yet. It seemed that he had traveled thousands of miles, but he had not traveled so far that the past had been ditched. He was almost afraid of losing his mind. A haunted man had no business following lonesome trails in a lonesome country; what he needed was someone to talk to, to confide in. But he was not at liberty to trust anyone, and it was dangerous to think of doing so.

Bruce Lescott could find no escape from the bondage of his yesterdays. Quantrill! The name rang in his head like the beat of an Indian drum. Fugitive! Always there was a hangman in the shadows with a noose ready for his neck; Quantrill and his guerillas, raiders and murderers and renegades! The public did not see Quantrill as a man who had fought for a lost cause; he was painted black and there was nothing white in the picture. Bruce Lescott urged his dun horse into a faster pace. The squeak of the saddle and the rattle of the steel bits on the richly em-

bellished bridle were the sole sounds to break the monotony.

The fugitive had changed his name. His real name would bring a bullet in the back and he had been forced to adopt several names since he had ridden away from Lawrence that eventful day almost two years ago. But the name he had now he would keep; he was satisfied with it. He would answer to it without awkwardness. His real name must remain sealed in the tomb, and the door must never be opened—never!

Suddenly he topped a ridge and saw the trail town crouching on the hard, sun-baked earth.

This reminded him that uncertainty lay ahead; two stagecoach robberies had afforded the Kansas governor a chance to put a steep reward on Lescott's head. Besides, in those holdups he had aroused the ire of Uncle Sam; with the government after him his dangers were automatically augmented a hundred per cent. Combined with those was the killing that would be placed at his door; he had shot the Wells Fargo guard in self defense. The latter from the Concord's roof had drawn a bead on him and Lescott had flicked a bullet at the man bringing him down from his perch with lead in his heart.

He was also reminded that one of the passengers of the stagecoach had recognized him. Lescott's mask had slipped and left his face momentarily exposed. An Army officer who said his name was Colonel W. J. Cole, had stepped boldly down from the Concord and defied him to open the express box.

"I know you," Cole had said coldly and without emotion. "You served with Bill Quantrill; you were second in command of the bushwhackers. You're known as a killer. I'll see you're hanged for this. The money in that strong box is a military payroll."

Aboard the dun, Lescott had replied with equal coolness, "You've said enough to condemn you. Crawl back in your cage and get out of here. You forget you saw me or by God I'll live to plant you in Boothill; that's a warning, Cole."

Why Lescott hadn't shot W. J. Cole he didn't know. Maybe it was because at that moment, when he had pulled gently on the hammer of his gun, a demure blonde face had appeared in the Concord's open window and a musical voice had said, "Please don't kill my husband—!" But Lescott was sorry afterwards that he had not gone ahead with his plan to destroy the man who had recognized him.

Reward posters would be scattered everywhere for him, dead or alive!

His horse struck the dust at a faster pace and the new-shod hoofs rang on sun-cooked ground. He passed scorched hayfields and caught the heated smell and the decadent stench of wilting greenery and of stagnant water. He saw red berries on bushes and tortured flowers that climbed rail fences, fields of sun flowers and dooryards of morning glories. Cloth tobacco signs flapped on the walls of ancient buildings. The sky was blue, a shade lighter than the fugitive's eyes. The sun bore down and was stifling; dry acidic dust choked him.

BRUCE LESCOTT loved his horse. Missouri was a fine dun-colored steed, six years now with his master—a horse that had never known another owner and that could almost read his master's mind. Horses have their own peculiar brand of intelligence; this one was worth a King's ransom to Lescott. The absconder wore his Colts in a wide shell belt, strapped low for convenience and speed of draw. They were pearl-handled blue guns. The fugitive's bronze face was broad, with high cheek bones, ebony-tinted hair, a straight wide mouth with lips, even in relaxation, a taut and stretched steel wire. The man was dusty. His dark blue shirt of expensive plain calico stuck to his back. His dungarees were stuffed into light military boots and his hat was a flat-crowned black sodbuster, held in place with a wide black chin strap.

He could look back thirty years, but he couldn't see that far; he was thirty years old last June. He wore the skull brand of Lawrence, Kansas, the brand of Cain. Lawrence with

the fields of the dead, the smoke-black ruins of homes, the sounds of terrified children and overwrought women screaming for help, the staccato explosion of guns—all this bedlam lived in the mind of the weary traveler and even the thud and stomp of his mount's hoofs on a wagon bridge did not diminish the din of it.

They had labeled him the worst killer of all the Quantrill band. "Get—! String him high and let his bones rattle in the wind." Every solitary cottonwood—in fact all big trees, with limbs sweeping his flat-crowned hat were reminiscent of shadowy gallows. King of The Missouri Killers, they'd said. For two years he had been running away from it. There was no surcease from his sorrows; his regrets were as bald and unmovable today as they had been in the beginning when he'd first started looking for forgetfulness. In the initial days it had not mattered.

Controlled by this somber mood he rode without fear and with small hope, thinking, as the way took him toward the trail town called Liberty, of the emptiness of the two years behind him, of beyond that, and the cherished friends he had lost. He traveled the road fighting his regrets and cursing his weak pride for letting him feel sorrow. But those things would never diminish; the sun had gradually dimmed in his life and now there was none.

Before he went down the last incline he braced himself. Then he saw two men in red shirts in the shade of an immense cottonwood. He masked his vigilance by tapering up a cigarette. One of the men wore a silver badge that caught the glints of the sun. He was massive; his gray eyes cold as river water, scanned the rider's face. Bruce Lescott brought his dun horse to a stop.

"Hot day," he said sociably. "How far's the town of Liberty from here?"

"Three miles due west. Come far?" The badged one spoke civilly.

"A hundred miles." Lescott stared over the man. His eyes met the lawman's, level and cold as the other's gaze; they passed over the big-boned face. He was not impressed. The features held an emotionless placidity. "Why?"

"What's the news? Didn't run into the James boys? They tell me they're holy terrors. That's a fine dun horse you've got there, Mister."

"My name's Bruce Lescott. I want to locate some good farm land."

Red Shirt did not introduce himself. "You got matches," he asked quietly. "We're on a manhunt and we've run out of Lucifers."

Lescott gave him a dozen matches and rolled another cigarette. Manhunt? Fugitive? Was he the man they were looking for? "What did he do?" There was no tautness in his voice; he was cool.

"He's not a man," said Red Shirt. "She's a woman; it's a woman hunt. She's a wildcat. Stell Marshall, known as the Yellow-Headed Panther. Owns the Prairie Queen freight lines. Went loco and shot up the town because a rival freight line owner had burned her out. So she said. Anyhow she and her renegades killed a dozen people—some respectable citizens who chanced to get in the way. We think she's out here, maybe in the mill. I've got some boys coming to help us. She's a dead shot and has got a dozen bad hombres to side her, all freight drivers."

"Huh, why don't you go in and see if she's there?" Lescott figured it strange that two men as mean looking as Red Shirt and his companion did not have the guts to go in after a woman. Even though she had help.

"We'll stall long as the other boys ain't here," Red Shirt informed him. "I've got only about five men with me. Makes six countin' myself, Lescott. It's almost an even match, but she's got th' advantage bein' on the inside."

Lescott exhaled a cloud of smoke and sucked in on his cigarette. "She must be very dangerous," he muttered, thinking aloud.

"Her father was a bandit." Red Shirt shrugged his massive shoulders. "They called him Black Bart. She run the freight line till she was burned out. The hombre who set her wagons on fire claimed she was peddlin' firearms to the Injuns;

he set his renegades after her. Neither of them freight operators are gentle. They're like wild animals, and they been after each other for a long time. Mebbe five years. But it came to a showdown this morning. She was burnt out last night."

Lescott mulled over the situation. "What makes you think she's in the old mill?"

"That's her white hoss tied to the willow over there." Red Shirt indicated a fine white stallion.

"Mebbe she just left the horse there to throw you off the track. So she's wanted for murder?"

Red Shirt lit a cob pipe and plopped his galluses. "We'll get around to makin' up a big reward for her. She killed Captain Charley Curtis' father. The Captain's mad as blazes. She's been a suspect a long time in sellin' firearms to hostile Indians; he's been after her." He nodded his head, pulled at a walrus mustache. "Yep, there'll be a big reward for her. I'd give a hundred to have my paws on her, Mister."

PETE, the other man, came waddling through knee-high burned weeds. He was an oldster; he wore jeans and carried a sawed-off shotgun. He had a round shrewd face and little black eyes. His heavy eyebrows met above his prehensile nose and were charcoal-black. "I'm tired of waitin', Tom," he said.

Lescott swung down off his dun. "If you gentlemen wish," he offered, "I'll take a run over there and search the mill for you. If she's in there I'll let you know."

"If you go in there and she's in there," Pete said dryly, "we'll know without you lettin' us, Stranger."

"His name's Lescott," said the man called Tom.

Old Pete scrutinized him with interest. "You got guts enough to go in there after the Yellow-Headed Panther? By George, Lescott, you must have come from a long ways off." He sighed. "Stell Marshall's easy the wurst of the Kansas killers now, but she used to be mild enough. We figgered she'd go off her bean someday, because she took after her old man in looks. They called him Black Bart and he was hell on wheels. He must have had a hundred notches in his Navies when he got bumped off by a U. S. marshal in Dodge City.

Lescott grinned. "I'll try to collect your hundred offer," he said to Tom; "if she's in there, please have your money ready."

Red Shirt grinned. "I ain't got a hundred on me, but I can get it for you, Lescott. Here's our best wishes."

Lescott dropped his bridle reins to the ground near a large cottonwood. He said nothing more and his boots rustled in the dry sun-scorched weeds. The mill had a rotten loading dock and disintegrated steps leading up to it. The sun painted black velour borders around the ancient building. Lescott walked up the stairs, his mind sharply attuned to the situation. Funny they regarded a woman as the worst of the Kansas killers. He wondered if they'd ever heard of Wild Bill Anderson and Quantrill. He spat disgustedly, waved a brown hand at the minions of the law. He stepped inside the hot building and stood on the threshold getting his eyes accustomed to the brown gloom.

Somebody said on the north side of the building. "He's got guts. But I reckon he never heard of the Yellow-Haired Panther—"

Lescott's boots scraped against the floor. He strode forward with an emphasis in his step.

Yes, he had heard of Stell Marshall. Who hadn't? She was known from Saint Joe, which was Lescott's old hideout, clean to San Francisco. She was one of the most daring freight line operators in business, or she had been. The Prairie Queen had been without much competition because the wagons always got through with their cargo, regardless of the Indians and road agents that infested the country once the Missouri river was crossed out of Joetown. And Lescott had heard of her father, Black Bart, too. But he had never met either one of them and had always entertained the conception that Stell Marshall was a rough, ungainly

young woman, as tough as boot leather. He thought how stupid those lawdogs were waiting out there to take a woman like Stell Marshall; the mill would be a damned poor place to hide.

He was cautious, risked no matches. He heard bats swishing around in the darkness and one raked his face with its wings. He did not wish to make a target of himself. Lescott kept out of the light of the open door behind him. The floor creaked until he found by sliding his feet he could get around making any sounds. From this day on Stell Marshall would be an outlaw; she would have to live as outlaws lived, with a price on her head. He shrugged, stomped on through the cobwebs and the dust and the stifling heat.

He saw nothing, but listened closely, thinking perhaps the woman had been hurt in the fight, if there had been one. The red-shirted lawman had mentioned a shooting affair and several deaths. It could be the woman had been wounded and was now lying in this old mill; he had a strange feeling about that.

The machinery in the big room made distorted lumps of darker shadow and he moved cautiously around these, gun in hand, poking into the gloom. He did not believe Stell Marshall would have come into this place to hide because to do so would be to trap herself. If she'd been accompanied by a band of men they would have opened fire on the few lawdogs outside and would have made a dash for freedom; they would not have waited for the sheriff to bring reinforcements.

Lescott thought of the creek and the wooded clump behind it. The trees were dense out there and the water offered a fine route of escape. Water left no tracks, no trail to be followed. The woman's white horse didn't mean anything; it merely proved she'd been here. Perhaps she had left the mount to throw the lawmen off the path.

He kept inching along, more to satisfy himself than anything else now that common sense told him the woman wasn't in the mill—unless she was hurt and had been abandoned by her embattled freight haulers.

Lescott decided to risk a light and pausing, he twisted up a piece of paper he had in his pocket, lighted it and held it in his left hand. This was a poor light but when he climbed to the loft, light came through the ceiling; he had enough to show his way. In a far corner of the loft he found her. She was lying on a stack of burlap sacks, her blonde Nordic face blood-stained.

LESCOTT stood speechless. He did not move. He was busy with conflicting impulses. He bent down and examined the wounds. These were superficial, mere flesh wounds and scratches. One minor wound in her forehead still bled; little silver-red bubbles formed and broke and ran away.

Gently he wiped the blood away with his handkerchief. The beauty of her tanned face startled him. She was about twenty-seven; her body was slim, with vitality suggested in its mold. She wore a calico shirt which was taut across her breasts, striped linsey-woolsey trousers stuffed into light black boots. Her legs were thin but well-shaped and her hips rounded.

Stell Marshall was far from dead. He lifted her tenderly to one side, rearranged the bedding and put her back down again. She opened her eyes when she was resting on the comfortable bed he'd fashioned out of the gunny sacks. She was not in the least frightened. Her blue-green eyes were cool. Her mouth opened; the rise and fall of her bosom was noticeable because of her deep breathing. She lifted one hand weakly and let it fall back to the floor. He was still bent over her. Gently he put his hands across her mouth and felt her soft warm lips. Their eyes met, lingered and unuttered words passed between them.

Slowly he rose. It was hot in the mill loft. The sun streamed through holes in the roof where there were naught but a skeleton structure without shingles in spots. The metallic sky did not seem so far away and the

black flight of birds could be followed. Sounds came plainly to him and he looked again at her and at the firearms near her hand. He inspected his own guns and slipped them back into the holsters. He nodded to her and, touching the brim of his flat-crowned black hat, he slithered away without noise.

He emerged into the sheen of the overworked sun and paused on the platform where Pete and the heavy-set sheriff were furtively awaiting him. Two men came around the building and one appeared at the end and walked along the edge of the mill toward the road.

"Well, men," he announced calmly, "you didn't hit the jackpot this time. There's nobody in the building unless she turned into a bat or something. And if she were in there I'm satisfied she would not be alone; her outlaws would set some kind of a trap for you so they could save her if it came down to brass nails. Of course you'll want to look for yourself. But—she's just not in there."

Pete growled at the sheriff, "I told you, Tom. While we've been waitin' for our other boys to jine us we've been allowin' her to get farther away." He was obviously disgusted with his superior officer's stupidity.

The sheriff frowned. "She would have killed us before we could have smoked her out, and it's like Lescott says; she wouldn't be in there and not have her men posted either inside or where they could help her in case of a gun showdown. That's what I figgered, so I waited for reinforcements. She's never without a band of desperate killers to side her, more than I have here to side the law. But—thanks, Lescott. We don't find men like you every day." He peered sharply at Lescott. "You just walked in there like you was steppin' into a schoolhouse pie supper; I'm sure none of us are goin' to forget you for what you've done for us."

LESCOTT gave little thought to seeing the sheriff again. But he was experienced in man tracking and he knew they would never go into the mill because his bluff had worked and their faces were satisfied. He indicated the creek which he could hear boiling in the trees. "Follow the water; you'll overhaul her if she's badly hurt. I wish I could join you. I enjoy this sort of thing. I'd like to get the Blonde Fox as you call her, sheriff; I've never had a woman as a quarry. But I'm tired. I guess you can tell that by how I'm lathered with sweat. But we'll meet."

"We surely will, Lescott." It was old Pete who spoke. He wheeled and lumbered off toward the white stallion. "We'll take the nag back with us. It ain't a stolen hoss. She never steals her nags. It's a lucky find."

"I get the stallion," was the surly retort. "You boys get on your nags and come with me. We'll take right out down th' creek. We might meet the other possemen comin' this way. They should have been here before this." He faced Lescott again. "Anytime you need a friend, you'll find me at th' county jail. Liberty's sixteen thousand and you'll like th' town if you've never been there before; most folks do. Good farmin' country around here, densely populated. Stop in at the *Red Moon Cafe* and eat your meals. It's close to the *United States Hotel* on Main Street. My daughter works there; ask for Willa and tell her you know me."

Lescott smiled faintly. "Thanks." He fashioned another cigarette. The lucifer painted the shadows out of his face. The flare left the strength revealed. He sat aboard Missouri and watched the men file slowly through the brush along the creek bank. When he rode across the wagon bridge beyond the mill the horse rattled the framework and thudded a drumming against the planks. He hoped the law men would hear this.

Turning back ten minutes later, he rode to the mill and reined in under the spidery branches of the cottonwood. He dropped the reins on the ground, picked his carbine out of the boot and spun around. Instinct and intuition flashed a red signal along his nerves.

Less than thirty feet away, shoulders tipped against the wall, stood a long, slim-shouldered young man. A black wool hat shaded his eyes. He was slack-muscled; he wore his guns in a wide belt without holsters. His gaze held a cool insolence. His canted head showed he was studying Lescott. The latter nonchalantly replaced the carbine in the saddle boot, then stepped forward.

Lescott tromped away from his horse swinging his hands away from his guns. He saw comtempt move slowly over the thin face in the sun, stamp itself there. He wondered at this. Why did the other man dislike him? But he did not dwell on the question long; the covert movement of the blonde figure did not escape him. As yet not a word had been spoken. He knew that whatever the man had against him would stay forever. There would always be that challenge to make itself felt. Lescott took another step forward.

2

STAND where you are! The man facing him shifted his weight so he was evenly balanced on both straight legs. His slitted eyes were plainer now. "I don't let strangers come too close to me. What's your name?"

Lescott had frozen and his hands were open, the fingers spread. "I don't usually answer such a question," he stated tersely. "Not unless a friendly person wants to know for a friendly reason. You don't strike me as being sociable." He leaned forward slightly, ready. He waited a split second. "I guess I don't mind telling you my name's Bruce Lescott? Fair exchange is not robbery; what's yours?"

The blond's stoic bearing did not relax. His mouth was straight and desolate now. "I go by the same rules," he said coldly. "But the name's John Howard; I'm from Texas. I understand you helped a friend of mine—think you know what I mean. Why?"

"That is most definitely my business." Lescott's voice was sharp. A querulous note had crept in. "You seem to know all the answers, Howard; dope it out for yourself."

"Stell's all right. She said to give you her thanks, hopes to see you again. You saved Tom Decker and his crew from being killed. We had them spotted and were ready when you entered the mill. They stalled because they expected their other men to join them." He reached up, touched the brim of his wool hat. "Don't follow me, Lescott." He walked into the trees.

The sudden way he took his leave of Lescott, bothered the latter. He went back to his horse, slapped him gently on the shoulder and rubbed the sweat off his sleek dun coat. The stench of dust was caustic. He could see it over his saddle, rising above the trees. He adjusted the stirrups, walking around the motionless dun. Green flies were buzzing in the sun. The horse swished his long beautiful tail, brown eyes were clamped upon his master. He moved his ears nervously, expressing restlessness; but he had the same iron control his master had.

The fugitive bushwhacker rolled another smoke. Something had entered his life; somewhere along the dismal road, danger riding hard on her shoulders, with dreams still alive in her heart, was a woman who had run afoul of fate. Her pride, her hopes and her desires to live were as keen as such emotions were in any woman of her age.

Lescott rubbed his big hands together, made more restless and reckless by the depth of his thinking. Forgetfulness was the only object he now had, the only thing he asked life to give him. Here the square-shouldered man stood, fighting to keep out of his mind the torture that had driven him into this strange, unfriendly land. He was a man who had tried to desert evil which had marked him with scars

that marred his brain. All this evil had to be beaten out of him and he would have to use his own fists to do it. There was no room in this world for fear; he would never beg nor stoop to cowardice. His thoughts lifted his upper lip and twisted it into a cruel shape. The woman's life and his life were alike, only she wasn't trying to defeat the evil.

He looked back at the wheel squeaking in the stagnant water of the creek's tributary; it stood at the end of the building. The skeleton ribs were falling in; green scum clung to the framework. The hot wind churned the oval affair in the dirty water. Lescott mounted his horse. He rode past the wheel and out upon the buff road. He headed for Liberty as he had headed for a hundred other towns since he had deserted his past.

THE *PARADISE* was a large, square boxlike affair, crude in exterior, comfortable inside. It was similar to a thousand and one other buildings which formed the new towns that had sprung up on the plains. But there was one thing that marked it as different. The saloon had swinging doors with windows on them made of stained glass—red, lemon and green. The lights that came through these windows painted the board sidewalk with rainbow hues. Behind him was a wide street; covered wagons and rigs of various types banked the curbs. There was an endless movement under the wooden awnings up and down the block. The town lay scattered out for perhaps a mile; tents, shacks and well-constructed log cabins spotted the prairie. A dozen wide dusty streets crisscrossed each other and Lescott had chosen the hotel closest to the county jail.

There was a card game going on in the big box—six men deep in smoke, with a waiter in a white apron standing there looking on. A piano player was doing his best to coax music out of an ancient relic; a fiddler sawed on a square-dance tune. A large door opened in the back wall into another high square box. Through the opening Lescott could see couples whirling on the slick floor. Around the top of the saloon was a gallery, crude and unsolid in appearance, and a narrow stairway leading up from the saloon's saw dust covered floor. The short bar was lined with thirsty patrons, nondescript men, r o u g h-garbed, dirty and unshaven.

A face stood out here and there, but there were not many faces deserving of the second glance. Emigrants and sodbusters came here to relax; now and then Lescott spotted the blue uniform of a Yankee soldier. He loafed over his whiskey and watched a dancehall girl weave her way across the room, past the gambling games.

Lescott moved slowly toward the games of chance and started toward the faro table. An empty pot-bellied stove stood near him, with a long stretch of rusty tin pipe disappearing into the gaudy wall paper.

He was restless; he tried his hand at cards and lost, tried again and lost once more. He shifted his interest to the players. The winners were quietly-dressed men who were clean and smelled of soap. They started a high limit game and Lescott dropped out.

He moved on to the Faro table. The dealer said to a big man who had just won a big jackpot. "Mike Fanning, your luck won't hold out. You've been too lucky with your Red Ball freight wagons and your faro games; the lane will have to turn."

He addressed a giant in a white shirt and black string tie. The man had thick towseled hair, long slitted eyes of a greenish hue. He was unarmed. His fists were large and walnut brown, his splade fingers strong and big-knuckled. He stood erect, shoulders back. A wide red belt decorated with Indian beads spanned his portly waist.

Big as a house, Lescott thought. *He would be a tough hombre to tangle with.*

The other players evacuated the table and left Mike Fanning standing there. He peered down at the

black-clad dealer, was studying the layout before him. He produced a handful of gold eagles and placed them carefully in the spot for the jackpot. He commanded attention. There was a marked brutality about him, a coarseness that bordered on the savage. He was reddish of complexion and had a few faint freckles around his broken nose. The giant sat down.

Lescott moved in closer. Those big hands had been developed by skinning mules, as it was called. He'd handled six horse teams to lumbering freight wagons.

"You think you'll get the money back that I've won from you." He chuckled. "Well, here's your chance; there's nothing yellow about me."

The man's luck stayed with him; he won again. Lescott pulled away from the faro rig. He'd been in the saddle until he was tired; there was a stiffness in his body he didn't like. He craved movement and another drink. In this room, he realized nothing could possibly live but the immediate present. He wondered about big Mike Fanning's luck. How long did a man's luck last? Was his own running out? But he felt he was farther away from the shadows of death now than he had been in a long time. Quantrill was back there in the lost months, the dissipated yesterdays and that was where Quantrill belonged. It was a feeling brushing against him, sharpening his senses. Men moved about in the saloon, smoke was thick and hung around the kerosene lamps. The heavily bodied giant shouldered his way to the bar and Lescott followed him.

He found a place. A cigarette glowed against the deep tan of his face. He wagged a finger and the barkeep brought him whiskey. Small things were happening here, like straws moved by the wind. The giant walked away from the bar, using his massive shoulders to crowd through the men who were trying to get to the bar. Lescott threw his cigarette into a cuspidor and kicked the cuspidor with his heel when he put his elbow on the bar. Talk made an endless humming sound in the room. More riders pushed in from the street. He bought another drink, poised the glass against the lamp's shine and saw the amber glow of the whiskey. Sweaty bodies made a rancid smell. But there was perfume, too—

LESCOTT was aware of someone crowding close against him. He peered down and saw a black-haired girl in a yellow dress. She gave him a smile with curved red lips. She was quite the most attractive woman he had ever seen in a spangled gown; he judged her to be about twenty-four or five.

"Like to dance with me?" she asked. Her voice was charming.

He said, "No. But I'll buy you a drink; I'm too tired to dance."

She was tall and slim against the marigold of the bracket lamps. Her head was up-and he saw her eyes which were dark and velvet soft. He felt the firmness of her shapely bosom. There was womanliness in her breasts and her shoulders. She was looking at him and a change was coming into her expression. It was an interesting face; Lescott knew he would always remember it. He let his eyes linger on her, with that starved woman desire becoming more pronounced than ever. He had seen women but he had paid them no attention because he had not found any of them worth looking at twice. But she was different—remarkably different. Her lips parted and the ends of her teeth were pale white and gleaming with shiny health. Her bright yellow dress did not subdue the fresh beauty of her face. Her brown eyes were smart, quick, alive with the vitality perfect health had given her.

"I just don't care to dance," he said lowering his voice. "I'm not much of a dancer to begin with. Maybe I'm too tired. But I'd like to have a drink with you, ma'm, and we might have a little visit; if I felt like dancing you're the one I'd want to dance with, I swear."

She laughed and he saw honest admiration in her expression. It was

something to be liked; it was something to have a pretty girl like you. The realization braced him and the trail weariness of a moment ago deserted him. He was alert and vigorous now, answering the challenge of the situation. His reserve strength quickly responded to his efforts and he was wide awake and deeply intrigued.

"We can have some wine on the balcony," said she, with that faint, provoking smile barely showing its edges. "I like to talk to strangers. I am not afraid of men, I have been meeting strangers here for weeks, and I always learn something. I don't mind saying you look very interesting."

A few minutes later they were seated in a curtained booth on the gallery. The girl held a lucifer to a cigarette Lescott had just rolled and the flare shone on the steel of his eyes. He was emboldened by her nearness and the sharp scent of perfume that came from her hair.

"Yes, I am sure you'll be interesting," said she, touching his sleeve.

The curtains were parted and a man rudely shoved his face through the opening, and Lescott found insolence in the big-boned brutal face. Big Mike Fanning stood glowering down at him, his hairy hands clenched into huge fists.

Quickly and with careful politeness the man apologized. "I beg your pardon," said Big Mike Fanning. "But— I thought I saw a girl come in here, a girl I was trying to find. I'm sorry I interrupted this nice conversation."

"All right, Fanning," Lescott said. "There has been no harm done."

The big man seemed surprised. "You know my name? I don't think I have had the pleasure—" His eyes slowly traveled over Lescott, and then he shifted his glance to the girl. "No, you have the advantage of me," Fanning added, and he was still suave in his politeness.

"I heard your name called by the faro dealer." Lescott did not see any reason for prolonging this meeting, but he tried to match the other man's attractive decoroum.

"Mike Fanning it is, stranger. They call me Big Mike. I operate the Red Ball stage line. What is your name, please?"

"Bruce Lescott," Lescott said.

The giant studied him a moment. "I hope to have the pleasure of seeing you again; please, again, accept my humble apologies." Stiffly he bowed and stepped back and let the green curtains fall back in place.

Lescott heard his heavy footsteps as he crossed the gallery and started down the staircase. When he looked at the girl he surprised something in her face that was as cold and hard as steel. Something hammered a warning in his brain; he sat heavily erect. He had never seen a woman's face grow so cold and masklike under his gaze. He wondered what had happened to her, but whatever it was, he suspected that Big Mike was the direct cause of it.

SHE WAS a little stiff and arrogant now.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "Are you afraid of Big Mike?" Then slowly, "you are the girl he referred to?"

She brought her shoulders up and the hardness faded quickly from her expression. But she did not answer his question; instead she asked one. "You said your name—well, I like the name of Bruce Lescott. If that's it. Usually I am nervous in a strange man's company, but I have not been in yours; my name is Fay Jerrard."

The name did not mean anything but he was sure he would remember it. He stared at her with his eyes veiled and marvelled at her exotic beauty. She was almost as pretty as the woman of the mill, the freight-line hellcat—but she was far more refined, he thought.

"I'm Bruce Lescott, a freight driver. I hear you've had a lot of trouble in Liberty over the freighter business. A woman was shot and several people were killed, I understand—"

"Stell Marshall, owner of the Prairie Queen outfit went berserk," Fay Jerrard said. "She accused Mike Fanning of burning her out. Mike owns the Red Ball wagons, and he was getting too big for the gal

with the yellow hair. They call her the Yellow-Headed Panther. Her old man was a bandit and died with his boots on; well, she thought Mike had—"

Lescott leaned forward slightly. "You mean the big man who just popped in here looking for a girl—the man you're afraid of?"

She shrugged coldly, avoided answering him. "The fireworks began when all her wagons were burned," she said coldly. "She came after Mike. For a long time she has been suspected of smuggling guns through to hostile Indians, but they've never proved it. When she stopped, with her freight haulers, in front of the saloon here and Mike's boys went out to meet her, the battle was on. She got hit and rode off on a white horse."

He nodded, traced rings in the spilled wine. He listened to her as she continued still in a cold voice."

"Captain Charley Curtis has been on Stell's tracks several days. He thinks she's a gun smuggler. Maybe she burned herself out just to get away, and not be caught with the guns in her possession. Mike says it happened that way." She paused, then said, "So your name's Bruce?"

She had ensnared him. He liked the way she said his name. It was hard for him to understand why he had been so quick to succumb to her charms. But the beating of loneliness against his mind had left him ripe for this turn in the road. He did not have trouble recognizing the cause of Big Mike's interest in her. She was a strange woman, different in everything she did, from the way she moved her hands and the light shrug of her left shoulder and the slow smile that curled her lips was as indefinite as any smile he had ever seen.

"You'd better watch Big Mike," said she; "the Red Ball owner is dangerous."

"I have seen dangerous men before," he said softly. "Why do you think he was satisfied to leave us together? He was looking for you."

That almost imperceptible smile touched her mouth. "It's simple enough to understand," said Fay Jerrard. "He knows he can put a dozen men after you; your life wouldn't be worth a counterfeit penny. But—you're a stranger, and Big Mike is infallably interested in strangers. He is not sure you and Captain Charley Curtis are not together; until he finds out you are not with Curtis, he'll keep his tigers away from you. Of course you must not show you are too deeply interested in me—"

"Suppose you tell me something about yourself?" he asked.

"There isn't much to tell," said Fay Jerrard. "I came here with a wagon train from Saint Joe. I was in love with a soldier and he jilted me for a steamboat hussy who plied her trade up and down the river, a slick dealer. I moved out of Saint Joe and let him have her. My father was a wagon boss who guided trains out of Saint Joe and was killed by Indians. I have been on my own ever since; I guess that explains it. I love good books and music, and learned to sing when very young, when my father was a scout out of a military post. My mother was a good woman; she was educated."

She got up and peered down at him. Her smile was as dim as ever, but it stirred him. "Thanks for the wine. If you're not afraid of Big Mike and his freight haulers we'll meet again. I'd love to have another visit with you."

THEY WALKED across the gallery and down the steps. It had been long since he had been as keenly interested in a woman as he was in Fay Jerrard. He wasn't going to let her get away from him. He showed her his hotel key. "If you get in trouble, let me know; I'd like to have you drop in on me so we can renew our acquaintance."

Without looking at him she said, "I might do that." She went on down to the bottom of the steps. The radiance of the bracket lamps, even though some of the chimneys were sooty, painted her in gold. She left him and hurried across the room. The piano player struck up a ballad and

she began to sing, standing beside the music box and looking straight at Lescott. It was a sweet, hushing song of a lost love.

Lescott moved over to the bar. Weariness made his body heavy. The bartender placed a glass and a bottle before him. He paid for it with a gold eagle, took his change and jingled it in his hand. Men walked around him, but he had plenty of room.

The sun's heat had not left the building and it threw off a pungent smell of resin. It was too small for comfort with a crowd in it. Lescott saw men who looked interesting, but saw them without interest and with his mind far away. He had mingled with these types for four years, knowing their fears and weaknesses, coping with their cunning and their trickery. They had set traps for him and he had set traps for them; he suddenly realized that loneliness had battered through his guard.

Big Mike Fanning spoke at his elbow, "You got everything you want, Lescott? Come on over to my table and let's have a sociable drink."

The boss of the Red Ball freight wagons moved across the room and picked a bottle of whiskey off a table. They sat down at a table near the stove. They had just taken their chairs when a man hustled up and stopped before Lescott.

The man was short, broad, brutal. He was bald; his eyes were set close together. His herculean shoulders had tremendous power in them. He wore a red shirt, arms long and thick. He also wore brown dungarees. He was without gunbelt or weapons. His shirt was open down the front to his waist and showed a heavy gray undershirt. He reached out, grabbed the bottle of whiskey by the neck and started to straighten up. "This is mine and I paid for it, Mister," he said to Lescott. "What business did that dumb fellow have taking it off my table—"

The stranger upset the bottle and it rolled off the table, the whiskey making a thread of brown liquid that ran off the table top onto Lescott's trousers. The latter came quickly alert, sensing in this something that had been carefully planned.

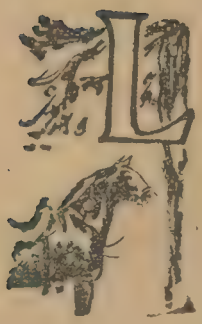
A quick anger mounted in Lescott's head. He got up and mopped the whiskey out of his chair with a white handkerchief. He shoved round and said, "you get away from here and leave us alone. I don't give a damn where the whiskey came from; spill it again on me and I'll cave your damn head in." He straightened to his full height of five ten and spun on his feet to follow the shorter, heavier man's movement. The latter took the bottle by the base and, swinging it down over his head, hurled whiskey into Lescott's face.

Lescott staggered back and ducked his head to keep the raw liquid out of his eyes. He hurled himself forward, grabbed the intruder and, whirling him, shoved him across the room toward the door. The man lurched backward, crashed through the batwings and fell outside. Lescott, paying no attention to the furore, jumped out behind the man. Within him he felt a hard anger which was deep rooted, not so much against the man getting to his feet on the board walk, as against the engineer of this trick.

"You want to finish this out here?" His voice was level, ice-cold. He was unbuckling his shell belt. The two heavy guns made an awkward weight in his hands. A dozen men came out the door, and with them came Fay Jerrard. She reached out and took the guns away from Lescott. "You can trust me with them," she said, "but you'd better forget about this and go on to the hotel, Bruce."

He smiled, but ignored her warning. He saw in the lamps' gild the head and shoulders of Big Mike Fanning. The hired play actor was now on his legs and plenty steady, the way Lescott saw it. He bent down and peeled his shirt off and rolled up the sleeves of his undershirt. He threw the shirt straight at Lescott, meaning to hit him in the face with it. In the same motion he rushed Lescott who, ducking the shirt, drove a hard fist against the squat giant's chin.

3



LESCOTT wondered if he'd have to use a knife or if his fists would do. It didn't matter to him much which it was. His anger had not cooled; what he wanted was a crack at Mike Fanning, the instigator of this trouble. It was going to be a brutal match. No doubt Fanning had sent his best barroom brawler against him. Already Lescott was thinking how badly this town needed a cleaning up. Mike Fanning, oppressor, and all his cutthroat colleagues needed funerals and Lescott hoped he'd find time to see to the matter.

The squat giant was into him now. The crazy yelling of the mob around them in the dust—they'd moved down off the walk into the wide street—and the sound of their smacking blows filled the early August evening. Lescott had never seen short legs move so fast. The man's stubby arms were equally as fast. Twice he got the ape's bent elbow and each time it hurt; he heard somebody yell, "Get him, Allan! You can take him—"

Allan came tearing in again and Lescott used a wide looping right to stop him. He heard the impact on the giant's forehead, saw him reel away. Lescott dashed forward to pursue his advantage; before Allan could get his balance, Lescott slapped him in the face with a straight arm jab. Allan reared back on his heels and went down. Lescott booted him twice, knowing he'd get the same when and if he went down, then he let the giant crawl painfully erect. They pounded each other viciously and Lescott felt the salty taste of blood in his mouth.

Allan hit Lescott with the butt of his palm and then jumped back out of the way. Lescott thought his neck was broken, but recovered quickly and circled his antagonist; he had crushed Allan's lips and saw in the torchlight someone had stated how pulpy was Allan's mouth. The giant paused to wipe his mouth on his undershirt sleeve, and Lescott hit him on the side of the head. From under their feet dust swirled and smoked.

Allan came on with more fury and Lescott could see he was hurt. But he knew the giant was full of whiskey and pain wouldn't annoy him much, not until the whiskey died in him. Then came a brief period of flesh mangling and bone crushing brutality. They were fighting close against each other in the circle of taut-faced spectators.

Lescott shifted his tactics and began to hammer Allan's body. It was like hitting hard rubber, but he kept driving his fists in, occasionally sledging the giant on the chin. The other man's massive strength was taking its toll, however, and already Lescott was breathing hard and spatting more blood. They clinched and dropped into the dust, fought on their sides, with the advantage going to the saloon brawler. Lescott was on hands and knees, trying to leap erect when Allan, on his back in the dust, lashed out with bootheels.

Lescott took both heels in the face and spat out a tooth. The screams of the crowd were louder than ever. Thinking he'd hurt Lescott, Allan stayed still till Lescott was on his feet, then tried to grab him around the legs. He almost succeeded before Lescott kicked him lose. Allan got up because Lescott let him get up; then they charged together again and their body blows sounded like the explosions of small firearms.

There was naked shock torturing Lescott as he circled his man again. He was bloody all over his chest, his shirt in rags; he knew he couldn't go on much longer and hoped to finish this right quick, resorting to a trick. He ran around Allan, keeping out of the way, then stopped and stood still, arms hanging down stiffly at his side. When Allan saw how motionless he was, he figgered no doubt Lescott was out on his feet.

Anyhow Allan came barging in, sledging out with both fists at where

he thought Lescott's face would be. But it wasn't there; Lescott had hurried back a few feet and now he kicked at the charging man's groin. A gasp of pain rent the night and Allan bent over. Swiftly Lescott came at him, locked his hands and brought them down across the back of the giant's neck. His brutal antagonist slid to his knees in dust that rose in a dense spiral and made Lescott sneeze.

Lescott placed his hands on his hips and waited, spraddle-legged, watched to see if his adversary was going to get up on his feet again. He finally made it. With renewed energy, although he was almost exhausted, Lescott started hammering Allan's ribs. Twice Allan got through to Lescott's head and the blows rang against Lescott's eardrums like the pounding of a sledge on an anvil. His knees almost gave way. He pushed at Allan. The latter was weak, too, and he didn't succeed in dodging the hard blow Lescott brought up from the dusty street. It crashed his chin and sent Allan rearing backwards against a hitching post.

ALLAN STOPPED with his back to this. They met there and Lescott hit him wicked rights and lefts in the face, knowing he'd closed one of the giant's eyes. The latter sprawled forward, caught his bent hands on Lescott's shoulders and almost carried him to the ground in his fall. He rolled in the dust, which puffed up like thick cannon smoke.

Lescott said, "Stay down this time, damn you—!" The befuddled giant remained on his face in the dust, but he soon began to lift his elbows, had them bent and was putting his weight on them as he slowly straightened his arms. Lescott's shirt was so wet with sweat, water ran down his bare belly. He waited, panting, rubbing his face with one hand, keeping the other big fist prepared for Allan's charge. Wobbling on his short legs, Allan took stock of the situation. His eyes shone red as fire through the swollen sockets and his broad, bony face was filmed with sweat that sparkled like miniature diamonds. Blood made a blossoming rose on his dusty gray undershirt.

Again he threw himself at Lescott. But he fell and when he went down he wrapped his long arms around Lescott's knees.

The latter crashed heavily upon his back, having been caught napping. He felt the bully crawling up over his body and holding his legs down with his weight. Lescott tried to wriggle free; he failed. Bloody and tired and dazed by the fall, he shoved weakly at his antagonist, pushed against his chin.

The latter crept forward, still crawling up across him, suddenly began to swing mule-killing blows to Lescott's face. He caught several heavy licks on the jaw and these befuddled him; he was almost done for.

"Come on, Bruce, get out of that," cried Fay Jerrard. "Don't let that bully freight hauler whip you, Bruce!"

With renewed energy which baffled him because he didn't know where it came from, Lescott got his powerful left arm around the bully's neck. He heaved upward, hurled himself over and pinned his opponent in the dust of the road. All the coarse brutality in him had been fully brought back to life; Lescott beat the man's face to a pulp, staggered erect and stood, weaving on his limp legs, peering down through a red haze at the prostrate form. The fortunes of war had changed swiftly but had changed irrevocably. The freight hauler was out cold; his blood trailed lazily into the dust.

Lescott found himself in his hotel bedroom across the street with his shell belt and guns hanging over his right shoulder. He had walked through the dust to the hotel without realizing what he was doing.

* * *

CAPTAIN CHARLEY CURTIS, assigned by the U.S. army to find what was happening to stolen rifles missing from the Omaha post, had wound up in his old home town, Liberty, Kansas. He'd worked patiently on the case, first believing

Stell Marshall was the gun smuggler, then suspecting the rival freight line operator Big Mike Fanning. He had witnessed the fight in front of the *Paradise* and was enthused over the way it had ended.

Captain Charley felt grieved over the death of his father. Several bystanders, who had witnessed the pitched battled between Mike Fanning's freight hauler's and Stell Marshall and her men, had claimed it was Stell's pistol ball that had killed Captain Charley's father. The old man had been buried that afternoon and Charley was still a little dazed with the sorrow of the occasion. His father had been a spectator and had taken no part in the fight.

Entering the *Red Moon Cafe,* Charley chatted with the girl at the counter a moment and ordered his meal. The restaurant was a crude affair. A five gallon smoke-blackened coffee pot rested on a shelf against the unpapered wall. The stools were uncomfortable. It was the typical western eating house of the period, 1866. The pine walls cast off a sharp resinous smell; the tables were made of native lumber, not planed smooth. Across the room in the rear was a partition that shut off the kitchen. Pasted on this was wall paper bearing big red flowers. A heating stove stood near the front door and the black pipe ran all the way back through the partition.

They talked about the fight. Charley Curtis was in love with this freckled, red-headed girl and he hoped to marry her. She knew about the man who had whipped the Red Ball freight line bully. Then they came down to Stell Marshall, the Yellow-Headed Panther.

"Everybody's afraid of her now that she's gone on the warpath," Willa Decker said. "Father thought he had her trapped out in the old mill but she wasn't there. Lescott, who whipped Allan, went in to see; Dad said he never saw a man with more cold guts than Lescott's got."

She explained what Tom Decker had told her about the happening. Captain Charley polished the buttons on his blue jacket energetically as he listened.

He again thought of his hunt for the missing guns from the Omaha Post, and wondered if Stell Marshall had resorted to cunning, burned her own wagons and sought to make it appear they'd been destroyed by Mike Fanning.

The Fanning and Marshall feud had begun a year ago when Fanning had moved in on Stell Marshall's established business. He bought a larger number of wagons and employed the toughest drivers he could get, importing the majority of them from Texas. Then the government agents had reported certain ambiguous activities engaged in by renegades who were stealing rifles and bullets from army posts, evidently by resorting to diplomacy and cunning, knowing just when each post was to receive new arms equipment. Charley had found, after a tedious investigation, that the trail ended in Liberty. It had to be one of the two freight-line operators.

But he had almost exonerated Stell Marshall until this tragic happening of the morning when she'd jumped the Fanning haulers and fought them in the streets of Liberty, killing several, and losing two of her own crew. The bystanders who'd gotten in the way of the stray bullets had sent the posse headed by Sheriff Tom Decker after the Yellow-Headed Panther.

Now Captain Charley was inclined to believe Stell had pulled a swift one; burning her own wagons because she feared she was being watched, trying to throw the blame on Mike Fanning, she had started hell popping wide open.

He sauntered to the door of the restaurant and removed his cavalryman's wide-brimmed hat. The brim was pinned up on the side and in the band was a plume which Charley disliked; he tugged at his heavy shell belt, glanced down at the neat row of buttons on his tunic and brushed at imaginary specks of dust. He walked back and sat down at the counter.

He ate fried eggs and potatoes and drank his coffee, wondering what had become of Stell Marshall, and

just how the stranger Lescott fitted into the picture. He found himself admiring this robust young man with the dark bearded face and slitted eyes. Upon completing his meal, he squeezed the girl's hands and said, "I'll see you later on tonight, Willa. I've got a lot to do." He had left a small diamond engagement ring under his plate...

NIGHT CAME and deepened; Charley had just left Mike Fanning's wagon yard; where he'd conducted a brief inspection of the rigs, when he saw he was being followed. Night had painted its obscuring tint on the street when he reached it, and he sidled into the shade of a wooden awning. He could hear the faint music of the piano at the *Paradise;* covered wagons were moving through the swirl of dust and blacksnake whips cracked, to the accompaniment of husky-throated drivers who urged their straining teams into more desperate efforts to pull heavy-loaded vehicles.

For a moment Captain Charley loitered in the gloom of the awning. It was like a parsol that built a screen around him. Instinct had warned him, however, and glancing up the street he saw several ruby-tipped cigarettes glowing in darkened doorways. About the whole wide thoroughfare now he sensed a covert silence.

He moved stealthily away from his vantage point, realizing he could not stay there forever. He heard the clump of hard boots on the planks behind him. He was being followed by two men, but he did not see who they were, dared not look around. It was no time now to grow panicky and he had long ago taught himself to keep cool in such emergencies. But he confessed to himself his predicament now was nerve-tautening.

He stomped on, with casual, jaunty air. He had his hat cocked on the back of his head, but his army holsters were unbuttoned and he was ready for his famous quick grab at his guns. He had always been proud of his reputation as a gunfighter, one of the fastest in the west, they'd said, but he had never picked fights with anyone. He was not the kind to gloat over past triumphs, although he had several notches in the hickory handles of his gun he'd won against odds.

He wanted to spin and draw and fire because he knew those men behind him were waiting until he started across the alley or stepped out into the street, to blast him down. The alley was straight ahead a few doors this side of the *United States Hotel.* They kept pounding along behind him and Charley kept stomping on along the wide board walk. The alley was less than thirty feet away now.

4

HE LAY upon the bed a long time, hearing every sound because his senses were keenly alert. The raw pain that had tortured Lescott had begun to lessen and his mind cleared. He got up off the bed, took off his shirt, and filled the washbowl from the flowered pitcher. When he washed, he felt the breaking of the dust caked on his skin and the burning soap removed after vigorous scrubbing, the last splotch of dried blood. It had been a murderously hot day.

He shook the dust from his shirt and put it on and he smoothed out the wrinkles in the sleeves. He went back to the pitcher and, upending it, drank his fill of the water. It was warm and had a vulgar taste but it was wet. He needed colder water and he debated what to do. His thirst was intense; he craved cold water and this made him realize his fevered condition. But gradually he began to feel better. He walked to the door that led out upon the balcony over the sidewalk; the breeze did not hit him here and he moved out upon the porch.

He thought quickly of all he had been through and of the girl who had held his guns while he was fight-

ing Allan, the Red Ball owner's hired killer. The kerosene lamps in the windows of the falsefronts stained the night a deep yellow; the stench of the coal oil from the light in his room sickened him.

He went back inside and turned down the wick. He had left the lamp burning too brightly and he felt he was in danger; he could be seen from the opposite side of the street.

He was determined not to slide back into the old rut of thinking about the past and his unremovable record—a record black as jet. Life was strange; he could look back and see where he could have changed the pattern of it if he had resisted the temptation to express his sympathy for the South in the War of the Rebellion. *Quantrill!* Was the man never to die, never to leave him, for a single minute?

He had met people he had admired. Nature had equipped him with an ability to see hypocrisy in the best, real virtues in the worst. He had weighed them, always willing to give them credit if they had credit coming. He had been injured—badly bruised by the best of them and he had been helped and soothed by the worst of them. A person's station in life had signified practically nothing to him. What a man was, always came out; the real truth was deeper than surface things.

When in the urges of a lonely man he had always been moved by thoughts of the women he had known. But he had seen few he had cared to lavish his attentions upon. They were the shallow kind, with deception so plainly etched in the masks of their beauty they were uninteresting.

He was aroused by a gentle knocking on his door. He flung it open, with his gun in his right hand, his head craned forward.

The man who stood there was the clerk from behind the desk downstairs. He was short and wore a flowered pink shirt with sleeve holders that gave his arms a balloon-like effect. He had a big handle bar mustache and wore his dark hair parted in the middle and pasted close to his head.

He extended a package. "This was sent to you from the *Paradise* across the street by Fay Jerrard. She said for you to drink it and go to bed and not venture out again tonight. My name is Simon Lane, and she instructed me to see you had everything you needed for your comfort."

Lescott nodded, and he took the package which he knew was a pint of whiskey. Magically the clerk had produced a spoon, a glass, a water pitcher with cold water filling it, and two lemons. From his vest pocket he produced a small packet of sugar. He came in, rolled the lemons, cut them and added the halves to the water. Then he poured in the sugar and stirred with the spoon the brew he had concoted, generally known as lemonade.

"Take all you want," Simon Lane said. "This stuff won't hurt you." He turned then on his heel and marched out quickly, closing the door.

Lescott almost drained the pitcher and he set it down reluctantly. For the first time in many hours his thirst had been completely quenched.

He sat down and folded his arms across his chest and felt the day's heat that had stayed in the room saturate him. He fanned himself briskly with his hat and paused only long enough to taper up a brown cigarette. He held the Lucifer against it and soon had the smoke going, inhaling it deeply.

He remembered now a thought that had occurred to him earlier in the evening. No man could live completely in the past. The links in the chain were not tough enough to hold him. Quantrill and Arch Clements, who had ridden beside him in those devastating raids, were dead. What had been would never be again. He knew their leavetaking should have left him unhampered and free. There was nothing left of the old war and the ruins of Lawrence had been rebuilt into a wholesome city with a sedate atmosphere. But their voices were not gone, nor were their memories.

It stirred him with such strange

power he shook his wide shoulders and unfolded his arms, to run his hands through his black hair. He did not have the strength to break the last link of the past.

Something had been spilled into his blood. He got up and stomped out upon the porch. It was then that his lethargy left him in a flash.

A MAN was running down the plank sidewalk, and another man cut across the street, wading dust. Lescott drew back, whirled and ran through the room, grabbing his guns to see they were ready for action. He stopped outside in the black fringe of the porch and waited. He saw another man moving with stealth but quick step along the sidewalk. The air tensed, pulsated with danger. Lescott hesitated, expelling a great breath, then he moved forward. One of the men had fired point-blank at the shadow of the man coming toward them; the other slowly unswung his gun and began a steady firing that raked the wall against which the ambush victim was walking. Cold berserk anger flooded Bruce Lescott's veins and destroyed his caution. The victim of the gun trap had begun to fight back. The street was empty save for the fighters. The cornered man was a soldier.

Lescott saw the two men who were behind the soldier; they had opened fire and their guns cracked sullen and loud in the night.

Lescott moved carefully until he was even with the pair in front of the victim of the trap, then he cut down on them, dropping both with clean fast shooting that left no question regarding his gun skill. He saw one of the men rise and run away, and the soldier had met the two behind him, spinning and pouring a devastating fire into them. They broke, and one staggered as he ran. They disappeared beyond the alley, and the reverberations of the gunfire, thudded and thumped over the street. The lingering echoes extended throughout the town and brought people to the doors of the business houses.

Two-armed men popped out of the *Paradise* and Lescott wheeled to cover them. Just in time, in the coal oil lamplight, he made out the figure of the red-shirted sheriff he'd met at the old mill. His companion was Pete.

Lescott moved out of the ankle deep dust, shaking himself like a huge blocky mastiff coming out of cold water. He holstered his guns, after ejecting the spent cartridges. He saw the soldier limping toward him, the street light illuminating his face and the generous, firm-lipped smile.

"In th' name of th' law stand still, you men," shouted Sheriff Decker.

Lescott shook the dust out of his hair and popped his hat against his leg. He was bareheaded and black curls stuck to his forehead. The soldier came up to him and pushed out a hand of warm cordiality.

"Thanks, friend, for siding me," Charley said; "I sure was in a tight crack." He turned and yelled at the two men across the street. "Come on over, Sheriff. I guess you can see me now."

Decker joined them, and Old Pete hopped away to inspect the corpse that had rolled off the sidewalk. Decker shook hands with Lescott.

"Glad to see you," Decker said. "You seem to get around and always stop to help somebody out, Mister. Your name's Lescott, you said. Charley Curtis here is a right good hombre. I kind of like to see you, fella. Hope you stick around here. Whenever I meet you it gives me hope you'll turn up again."

Lescott got a better look at Curtis. The young man impressed him, but he hated the soldier's blue uniform. He had become reconciled to seeing the color, though. In two years a man gets used to anything and the only soldiers he had seen since leaving the war behind him were blue. The blue of the damned Yankee.

He said lightly, "If the odds had been even I would have stayed out of the rukus, but I never liked to see two against one. Glad to meet you once more, Decker; I'd rather

have friends than enemies any day in the week."

Tom Decker smiled broadly and shifted his shotgun from one hand to the other. The wooden awning over them threw them in deep shadow but the window lamps gilded their faces.

"You makin' any progress, Charley?" Decker asked, turning to the soldier. "I reckon the Prairie Queen freight line is now a thing of the past; there ain't nobody left to run it. No doubt Fanning will take over the whole shebang. Stell Marshall didn't leave no heirs. That hot-headed, murderous blonde won't never come back to Liberty, you can bet your boots on that."

OLD PETE was kneeling beside the corpse of Lescott's victim. Already in the heat the flies had begun to swarm around the bloating face.

"Shot clean through the head," Pete exclaimed. "Drilled through the back of the skull between the ears. Shot in the back—" He broke off and mumbled something Lescott didn't catch. He scrambled around.

The fugitive shrugged. "Makes no difference to me," he said. "They die as quick that way as any other." He wondered if it would be held against him. What other way could he have shot the man? They had jumped the soldier without warning; they'd had no warning coming in return. He shrugged again and tapered up a rye-straw. He struck a match and it painted his face, showed the poker expression, the keen slitted eyes. "Like a brass padlock," they'd said back in Missouri when referring to his face. There was no brutality, nor anything sensitive in the lines; but there was something reminiscent of boulder stone in the mask.

Captain Curtis had been thinking; when he saw Lescott's face lock itself up, he wondered what lay behind the face and the man. He didn't want to ask unpleasant questions. The man had saved his life, and was indifferent about having done so. Curtis was quite sure he had never come so close to death; he owed the man something. He would pay his debt at the earliest opportunity, but he hoped it would not be in gunsmoke.

The deputy, still working over the dead body, lifted his face in the smearing dust. "Hired gunslick. Four notches in th' cedar handle of this six-gun. Four pin marks on th' holster and the leather's thonged down on his thigh. Them pin marks show they was put there in a hurry. The idea's an old one; it can be done quick and a fella won't forget how many he's downed."

Captain Curtis said morosely, "They put the best they had against me tonight, Tom. I guess maybe I'm hot on somebody's tail; he's afraid I'll nail him. The gun smuggler, or I miss my guess. He's playing for big stakes and he isn't taking any chances."

"Stell Marshall," Tom Decker answered; "it's her way. Cunning and mean as the panther after which she takes her nickname. She figgers because she done your Dad in you'll be coming after her. She ain't afraid of me, but sure as hell she's scairt of you. This rukus tells its own story; you've got Stell Marshall to settle with for the attempt to kill you, Captain Charley."

Lescott wondered why the sheriff was so quick to put the blame on the Yellow-Headed Panther. They walked up the street together, Pete staying with the corpse. Suddenly Lescott took leave of them, crossing the street and moving briskly through the breeze-eddied dust; he didn't look back.

A ROW OF vigilant men stood on the sidewalk for a block. They were like grim sentries, with a distance of about ten feet seperating them. The unusual way in which they were posted there in the kerosene light gave Lescott a strange feeling of apprehension. Even when he lifted his right foot and stepped up high on the curb, swung, leisurely toward the *Cattleman's Paradise*, they still remained motionless shadows. He counted the dusky figures, not entering the saloon, but

swerving away from the batwings and tromping along the board walk. Thirteen men stood there, like hangmen, or eerie apostles of death or like anything unearthly. Lescott wondered if Captain Curtis had observed them.

He walked on past the black, silhouetted and spooky men and came, finally, to the livery stable. He stomped inside and took a look of Missouri. A lean, ragged boy in a big wool hat and a tattered calico shirt, came briskly to attention. He sat on a bale of hay and he was reading a paper novel when Lescott surprised him. Hurriedly the boy stuffed the book inside his shirt and hopped to his feet, his pale face cherubic with smiles.

"I'm the hostler, sir," he said. "Anything I can do for you? I shore will be mightly tickled to serve you, sir. You look like the fellow I have been reading about in this book called *The Bandits of The Border.*"

Lescott grinned. Few things made him grin and it cracked his face open. He gave the boy a gold eagle. "Buy yourself some boots," he said. "Better get a pair of overalls, too. Put the rest of the money away or buy food with it. A growing boy needs lots of food; you feel better when your belly's full. What is your name, fellow?"

"Raymond." The boy's eyes sparkled; they held a feverish anxiety to please; they were pale blue eyes, sunken in sockets that were bony. His shirt was like a crazy quilt, it held so many patches. "I'll shore do that," Ray said. "I been hungry a week. I live hard. My father was killed in a gunfight out there in the street; that was some of Big Mike's dirty work."

Lescott sat down on the bale of hay, lighted another cigarette. From the *Paradise* the music tinkled down the street. The sap was about gone from him; he'd been traveling day and night and there was a weariness in his bones. For a long time he had imagined his existance trembling and about to topple into the end of things. He spoke sharply and then grinned to relieve the hardness of his voice.

"Mike Fanning? Owner of the Red Ball? Why did he kill your father, sonny?"

"Pop was town marshal. We was strangers here; we came from Kaintucky. Pop didn't know much about lawin'. They told him it would be an easy job. Second night Fanning called him into the freight yard. Would he like to make a lot of easy money, Fanning asked. Pop didn't like Fanning and said No, he was honest. Next night was th' end; Pop was gunned down by two strangers."

"Your only friend's gone, huh?" Lescott tossed the cigarette through the open door, stared up at the gold stars over the town's backdrop. He expelled a great breath.

The boy squared his slim shoulders. "Tell me more about Fanning." Lescott said, and the kid nodded. His pale, pinched face glowed with interest.

"Well, you know he makes a lot of money runnin' his freight wagons from here to Omaha and to Saint Joe." The boy talked quietly. "He hangs out when he's in town at the *Paradise*. He's got a girl there. They stand in together. He makes the girl do things for him, like soundin' out strangers. She gets friendly with them, then drops them and they don't get to talk to her no more. Mike Fanning's a low, mean critter; he has men ridin' in here all times of night. They pack guns and are newcomers. Some of them you never see but once. Once when I found blood on a saddle, two men pistol whipped me and made me promise I'd never look at them saddles again."

Lescott was thinking about Fay Jerrard. She'd try to drain him dry.

"When I see you tomorrow, Raymond, you have on new boots and new overalls or I'll give you a spanking you won't soon forget."

The boy stared at him with hero-worship in his timid eyes. "I'll shore do it, Mister Lescott," he exclaimed. "You can bet on me; I wouldn't want you to do to me what you done to Rufe Allan."

Lescott chuckled good-naturedly

and stomped off along the board sidewalk.

5

CAPTAIN Charley Curtis sat in a chair tipped back against the stone wall of the jail-house. He puffed at a black cigar and enjoyed the languid evening. It was about one hour after the attempt had been made to kill him and since he had met the most compelling personality he had ever known—Bruce Lescott.

"He radiates a strength that gains your confidence," the Captain said to Tom Decker. The sheriff sat on the stoop outside the door. "Never saw such a calm, resolute hombre. I'll bet he wouldn't back up an inch from the very devil himself. I have surprised glints in his eyes that lend him a sinister look, but when he grins he grins all over his bronze face. He won't be an easy one to handle. I'd bet he works on moods and is whimsical as they come."

"You make him sound like a freak." Sheriff Decker was having a rough time with the cigar Curtis had given him; he wasn't used to them. "For me, I'd trust him. When he entered that mill he was like a fellow who didn't give a damn about nothin'. We need a man like him right here in this lockup, to help enforce th' law."

"You didn't doubt him when he reported the woman wasn't there?" Curtis stared at the lamplight in the windows of the *Paradise Saloon*.

"No, sir. I could tell he wasn't lyin'. I never figgered that way; he had no reason to lie. He had traveled far and he was real tired, but his face showed his interest when I told him about the Prairie Queen's boss. He didn't understand how a woman could be so dangerous and he made light of us for hesitating to go into the mill after Stell."

The Captain nodded. He was thinking of the Red Ball and Prairie Queen feud and how big the toll was it had already taken. He was wondering if it had ended or if it had just commenced. Big Mike Fanning wouldn't let Stell stage a comeback. It was too late for her to come back, Curtis thought; she had too many murders charged against her. She was the daughter of Black Bart, one of the worst owlhoots the west had ever seen. It wasn't likely that she would even think of surrendering; she would kill as long as she could fire a gun, to keep from being captured.

Charley Curtis listened with half an ear while Decker explained in detail what had taken place at the mill. The other part of his mind was devoted to the mystery of the missing army rifles from the Omaha military post; if Stell Marshall was behind the gun deal, then she had left herself wide open to certain defeat. Long ago her reputation as a hard woman had spread throughout the west. She had fought gamely against the ever-increasing odds against her. Besides being an expert with both small and heavier firearms, she had the nerve to do daring things.

The Captain thought of the trail he had followed and how it had brought him back to Liberty—now it was almost a cinch that the gun smugglers operated out of the trail town.

He gave some thought to Sheriff Decker and some deep consideration; he was in love with Willa Decker and planned to marry her. He could overlook many of his future father-in-law's shortcomings—and Tom Decker had more than a few of these.

Again the Captain thought of Lescott and found the man intrigued him more than a little because of his cool manner in answering the challenge of danger. He was the bronze rider and he was the mystery rider, but there was one thing sure—Lescott was a gunfighter.

HE FOUND the burial parlor. The undertaker said his name

was Samuel Bright, Sam for short, and he stood working over the cadaver of the man Lescott had shot in the back of the head. The face of the corpse was that of a young man; it was a rugged face, bearing a saber scar across the chin. The hair was brown and the cold, glazed eyes were the same hue. He had not been unhandsome in a rough way.

Sam Bright did not know the man, and he claimed he knew every resident of Liberty. "I know 'em all when I see 'em," Sam said. "But this one I never did see before I got his corpse to prepare for Boothill, Mister Captain. But I can say one thing truthfully. It's a good thing somebody fired a slug through the back of his head. Judging by his notched gun-handles he was a professional gun-hawk; he might have made hard going for you."

Charley was not without his feeling of appreciation and warm friendliness for the man who'd risked his own life even though he'd shot his opponent in the back. He had implicated himself with the law, and in this town the law was held in great disrespect. The town was full of fugitives, Charley was sure. But his attempt to connect the dead man with Big Mike Fanning failed; there wasn't a thing to be gleaned in that direction. However, he was sure the corpse was that of a hired killer imported to take care of certain jobs. The owner of the Red Ball freight wagons was no saint.

The dead man's clothes offered no solution to the problem. Sam Bright moved quickly about the bare, almost empty room, a skinny individual wearing a stovepipe hat, tight-fitting black broadcloth and a white vest. He had longish sideburns, a sharp chin and a sharper nose, and heavy black eyebrows. His skeletal face revealed no sign of intellect; he was just an ordinary man making an ordinary living, about fifty years old and none too tidy about his person or his work.

Charley walked back out into main street; in the night air he caught the sweet smell of the prairie and heard the lonesome howl of timber wolves. Locusts made their peculiar rattling sounds and a hound dog lifted his muzzle in the radiance of the saffron-hued moon. It was ten-forty by his watch. There was much work to be done yet before the night was gone. He hoped to question the boy who stayed at the stable; in the past the kid had given him some invaluable information. The Captain knew the Red Ball kept some of their wagons horses there.

He suddenly realized he was being followed again. *Playing for big stakes,* he thought. *U.S. army rifles for the Indians. I'm a threat to them and they wish to get me out of the way so they'll have unhampered going. I'd better watch my step—*

The soldier came up even with the wide alley where the former attempt had been made to take him in a gun trap. Glancing sideways at the *Paradise* across the street, Charley saw there was nobody in front of the saloon. Horses stirred nervously at the tie rail, bothered by flies and other insects. The bugs swarmed in clouds around the lamps. Charley fought them from his face; they stuck to the sweat.

Then, without further warning, he heard a sound that sent his hands flying to his guns. Two men had followed him. Now there came a scuttling sound from the confines of the alley. His breath stopped; he wheeled and planted his back to a storefront. The awning's shadows enveloped him. But in the street's kerosene lamps he saw the pair hurrying toward him. From one corner of his eyes he beheld a shadow flit toward where he stood. He came out of the alley with Indian stealth. Cold and prepared the Captain waited. No fear touched him. A man gets used to danger; he had been in hazardous places in the war and had fought out of traps like this one. But he knew there was always the time when he'd fail. He was none too certain of the outcome of this bold effort to nail him down. So he crouched there and his courage remained undaunted; his nerves did not let him

down. The two men who approached him at a fast gait did not hesitate until they were within twenty feet of him; then they paused and almost in the same motion, jumped into a darkened doorway. Charley saw the sparkle of their guns. Just then somebody in the alley whistled, making a long shrill sound; when the Captain spun about he saw the vivid shine of another weapon.

Trapped! Death hovered over the main street of Liberty; and Death, the stalker, suddenly began to yammer in the sharp explosions of guns!

* * *

BRUCE LESCOTT did not understand himself why he had come west to remain in the state of Kansas. For an ex-Quantrill man Missouri afforded the perfect haven of refuge. He had answered an impulse beyond his power to resist and now here he was in the devil's front-yard so far as bushwhackers who had followed Quantrill were concerned. Perhaps the lure of gold was in the back of his mind and he had followed the trail so many had trekked along in quest of sudden and amazing riches.

He sat on the porch above the sidewalk. In this land of rugged men and lean cattle, where emigrants were settling daily to enlarge every community, he had found excitement, the very thing he had run away from. His sick conscience would never heal out here. Lady Luck was with you or she was against you; here she made herself most difinitely felt if she happened to be stringing along with you. Lescott thought, with a sharp stirring of mingled emotions, of how he had selected Liberty because of its name. The settlers came in wagon trains and dropped off to build their homes around this town, deceived by the tranquil atmosphere. Here Lescott had thought would be an ideal place to hang up his guns, find a small piece of land, start busting the sod and turning himself into a peaceful, useful citizen. But it seemed now that Fate had not meant him to reform. He sat there and took in a deep breath of smoke and exhaled it leisurely. He regretted having come west, seeing in this mistake where he had been unfair to a cleaned man within—the inner man who had revolted and carried him away from blood and death. The Man On The Dun Horse recoiled from a haunting past and tried to adjust himself.

Lescott found it hard to believe Fay Jerrard had tricked him. He remembered how she had looked at him and recalled his first impression of her. The woman had undergone a change of mind and heart. It was not impossible for a woman to change, to want a different life; Lescott knew that *he* had changed and that he wanted a different future. What he had seen in the girl's eyes and in her face, what he had heard in her voice, were things that could not be erased from his memory or diverted from actuality. A keen desire to see her again suddenly came upon him.

He got up and walked to the balcony's rail and stood peering down. The night was still, stars were like silver polka dots on a blue necktie, and the yellow moon was supremely majestic. Round and genial like a friendly face, the moon stirred him to a feeling of cordiality.

Pedestrians moved about in the street and the dust was smoky under the wheels of a rolling buckboard. Then there came a lull in everything and motion was suspended; nobody moved and the street was suddenly empty. Then his listening ears caught a faint sound that gradually came closer. A man clumped up the sidewalk; Lescott saw the man's figure outlined in the saffron lamplight. Later the man emerged from the frame structure and Lescott recognized him. A grim smile touched the watcher's lips and he followed Captain Curtis with his gaze.

He saw the two shadows that appeared covertly in the middle of the street, and stiffened in the grip of this sign of danger. He did not wait, but went out through his room buckling on his guns and stopped in the soft blackness beyond the hotel's porch. He ran his eyes up along the

row of falsefronts. The furtive pair moved surreptitiously along the edge of the high curb and made no sound in the dry, deep dust. Lescott stayed on the ebony, border and took every precaution to shield himself against discovery. He knew Captain Charley Curtis was about to be attacked again by mysterious enemies and it was meant by this diabolical faction to be a one-sided gun fight, if there was any fight at all.

A BAND of loping horsemen suddenly appeared, veering into Main Street from one of the intersections two blocks or more away and they charged through the dust, yelling themselves hoarse. They were like cavalry men launching a vigorous dash at the enemy and they smashed the serenity of the night, seemed to jar and shake the very stars from their blue bed above.

Lescott, at first startled by this spectacle but quickly getting himself in hand, did not know which side the approaching desperadoes were on; he whirled to pound his guns in a desperate stand against the avalanche of death. Confusion blended with bedlam and everything became tossed about in the hurricane of gunfire and disaster that rattled and jumped and exploded into raw violence.

Coming at full speed, bridle reins in teeth, wielding flame spouting six guns, the phantom riders thundered forward. Dust became a dense blanket that rolled along the street from under the drumming hoofs and Lescott, holding his fire, saw those horsemen emptying their guns in a deadly fire which they directed at the Captain. The ex-Quantrill raider saw and heard and was convinced that a miracle was in progress before his very eyes. In flying window glass and splinters from the storefronts Lescott ran hard upon the heels of the alien shadows ahead.

No stock was taken of his own predicament. He did not ask the meaning of the swift change in the fortunes of war. The riders leaned forward in their saddles and hammered flaming death at the ambushers. They toppled woodenly and somersaulted off the sidewalk and the phantom horsemen screamed at high pitch in the Melee, urging their steeds into the fanning dust, straight ahead, on out of town. They had come suddenly and they rode out of sight suddenly. Long piercing echoes of their wild yells remained, lingering over the cross-hatched streets. Men came to doors and windows and groped for weapons.

Banging doors and clumping boots on the plank walks followed the noise made by the marauding horsemen. Lescott had reached the Captain's side. Together they hovered down, side by side, in the dust and the gun-smoke. They were shielded by the low hanging awning. The three dead men lay like sticks of cordwood, blood staining their dusty beds.

Gaping holes in the windows of the falsefronts showed that the raking fire had been disastrous. Into these holes drifted the sulphuric smoke of the hot lead holocaust.

Lescott had seen the riders from hell swoop down upon the soldier, riding abreast, one slightly in advance of the others; he had seen the crimson flashes from their weapons as their horses plunged past.

The Captain walked out to the edge of the sidewalk and stared after the magically disappearing horsemen. He moved back to join Lescott, who stood blowing smoke out of the barrels of his Colts. He holstered these and calmly spat into the dust.

"We'd better get away from this spot," said the Captain. "I don't care to risk being the center of attraction. If we high-tail it we can avoid a lot of fuss that won't do us any good. Come on—let's make a run for the alley—"

He fitted action to words and they spurted in a dash through the areaway. They made as little sound as possible. Cries and excited voices followed them in harsh echoes; the

spectators had come now to the dead men who had perished ironically in the trap they had set for others. The soldier and the fugitive ran side by side their elbows touching, silent. Behind them the quiet of the night was profound, and calm had begun to take over the reins of the town again. Liberty, Kansas, settled down quietly, with a mystery to baffle every resident. The phantom horsemen had come out of the velure of the night. A deeper blackness closed in and lengthened the somber shadows.

* * *

HOUSED IN a line cabin on the Circle C, Stell Marshal and her companions basked in comfort until nightfall. They had traveled by a circuitous route from the ancient mill to this hideout. They were pleased because the law had been tricked into relinquishing the chase just when they'd been on the brink of victory—or was it death? The tranquil stranger had upset the plans of Sheriff Tom Decker in a way so subtle that the minion of the law had not suspected the truth.

The Circle C had been abandoned after the death of the foreman, Hatch Milford and the owner, a woman in New York, had not appeared to claim her property; it made an ideal rendezvous. Stell Marshall and her followers had singled it out from among several other good places of concealment. The cabin was situated on a ridge and completely enveloped in cottonwoods; the Arkansas River was within a few steps. Here boats were conveniently placed for a hurried departure, the boats having been bought from a roving band of river Indians.

The doors and windows afforded the Prairie Queen freight haulers and their fair owner a splendid view of the trail. The road was rutted from a recent heavy rain. The sun had come out of its blistering dry heat had absorbed the last bits of moisture from the ground. The rain—the first of the summer which had begun two months ago—had not been sufficent to save the rotted vegitation.

Stell Marshall—the Yellow-Headed Panther—had the north room. The middle room was for the cooking and serving of meals and any meetings the fugitives might deem necessary to their welfare. The south room was for her men. They slept on the floor on straw mattresses and featherbeds they had found in the shack.

The compulsion of the woman's voice swayed these men into obedience, that and her beauty. They had stayed with her. She had asked them to side her and they had been willing to go to hell alongside of the woman who had bossed them when they were wagon drivers. They had gone through snow and sleet, rain and sunshine for her and the generous wages she had paid. Now they were on their own, practically speaking, and if they received any pay for what they were doing, it would not come through legitimate channels.

They had made their decision and there was no backing out of it now; of course all they had to do was to ride away and leave her because the law wanted Stell Marshall and didn't give a damn about them. But they were tough men who had lived tough lives and they would not go back on the blonde panther, not until they had seen her through to the finish.

An imperturbable bunch of renegades they were. Ready to wrest a living by nefarious means they contemplated an ugly future and swore they would give the lawdogs something to worry about. Knowing how the situation was in Liberty, that nothing could come of any honest efforts they might make, they were becoming more formidable. And Stell Marshall liked them that way.

Why didn't she keep on riding away from the community, just riding along the trail to a safer climate? They had asked themselves the question and Stell Marshall had answered it for them. She was obstinate, she would show up the Red Ball for what it was; she would even prove it was Mike Fanning who had smuggled those guns to the Indians, and

who had robbed the army posts. She would see Mike Fanning in hell for the trouble he had caused her.

The Yellow-Headed Panther sat at a big table in the middle room. She was tall and stately and her blonde hair was combed close to her head. She was clad in a double-breasted red woolen shirt, close-fitting revealing the bulge of her breasts. Her slender legs were clad in Linsey woolsey trousers with shoe straps on the bottoms. The pants were tight and displayed the beauty of her limbs, hips and waistline. The woolen shirt had two pockets and from one dangled the yellow strings of a tobacco sack.

Two men stood at the table, facing her. The other members of her band sat outside the leanto with the horses, a dozen sturdy Morgans, chosen with care for their endurance as well as their speed. The Yellow-Headed Panther had cunning blue eyes which turned green in the lamplight.

Carbines and saddle gear were stacked against the wall of the leanto. Each man wore a shell belt and two guns. They were rough-garbed freight-haulers, bearded and reliable to Stell, every one of them a Texan.

Stell's lieutenant, blond John Howard, leaned over the table and rested his elbows upon it and cupped his chin in the palm of his left hand. "I think it's a damned foolish thing, to kidnap Captain Curtis. As for that other fella—well, you didn't say anything about wanting to see him again. Just why have you changed your mind? Of course I grant he's one tough customer judgin' by the way he come into the mill and, although he might be in a tight crack in Liberty, I imagine he's one who is capable of taking care of himself. Why risk gettin' ourselves cornered by goin' after these two men and givin' away our hidin' place to Decker?"

"I'm still giving the orders," she snapped. "Take the men with you. I'm not afraid of bein' left alone. You can leave Mogo. Ride into town and see what's goin' on; if Fanning's men give you trouble blast the hell out of them and get out of there. We'll go whole hog since we've started." Then a moment later, "I'll give you a note to deliver to Lescott. But you bring the Captain with you; he'll be better off here than there. I can slit his throat—or at least know what he's doing. Don't let the Red Ball outfit harm a hair of his head. Now—get movin' and don't come back empty-handed."

JOHN HOWARD looked strangely at the other man and winked; Stell caught him at it. She turned to the short dark rider on her left. "Tex, you do as I say and not as Howard tells you. I'm still boss of this outfit and you'll obey my orders, just as you did when you were driving and guarding my wagons. I've counted on you, Tex. You've been square and I have been honest with you. If Howard loses his guts, kill him; don't waste time. You're a better gunman than Howard ever was. I want the stranger to come out here; I want to see him again. My note to him must be delivered tonight. Further, I want all the information I can get about the stolen army rifles Mike Fanning has concealed. Get out of here now, and ride like hell. Don't let any harm come to Charley Curtis; fetch him with you, bound and blindfolded. Now git—!"

They left the room, their spurs jingling, the squeak of their boots making little echoes of sound.

She watched them. She compared them and drew her own conclusions. Boss of the Prairie Queen freight wagons, she had seen many men in her life. She knew the tough ones that would never soften. She could read them; they seldom deceived her. Every time Tex looked at her she read keen desire in his savage eyes. But she had to have him, as dangerous as he was, knowing that he couldn't be trusted where there was a good-looking woman.

The day was steamy hot and the smell of scorched grass lay heavy on the wind. The sun erupted a shower of gold that slanted through the open door. A redbird hopped about

in the dooryard; a blue jay made his raucous complaint. Crows cawed in the trees. Stell loved the quiet atmosphere of the cabin. She could smell the open fields and hear the rustling of the river. She peered up at the sun inflamed sky. Azure and unmarred by clouds, a perfect sea as flawless as a set in a ring. A pale lemon light enveloped the gaunt trees. There was an oppressive restlessness in the air.

Stell was troubled. She had lost her head. In an impulsive moment she had brought the old feud between the Prairie Queen and the Red Ball to an explosion. She was charged with murder; she had launched the attack and being the aggressor she had placed her interests in great jeopardy. She had been wounded in the fight. Mike Fanning had lacked the nerve to side his men in the affray, had stayed behind shelter. Her close call to death when bullets, fired point blank, whistled at her had left its mark.

She rose nervously and went into her own room to undress. Here she swapped the heavy clothes she'd worn for light calico. She slid the thin one piece dress over her head and it clung to her body. She left the cabin and walked slowly toward the river, knowing she wasn't followed. She divested herself of the single garment, stood nude in the sun with her yellow hair streaming down over her shoulders. She walked out into the bubbling stream. The water was cool and refreshing. She swam with a long understroke.

Stell shoved a log out of the way then pulled it to her. She rolled it over and over, diving from it as it spun and churned the water. She straddled the log and rode it as she would a horse.

Funny how she had found it hard to forget the stranger who had walked into the mill, looked at her, wiped blood out of her face, rearranged her bed, put her down again from his strong arms, and then walked quietly out of her life. She knew he had lied to the sheriff to save her.

"I'll never forget him," she muttered. "I'll never rest until I see him again and feel his comforting arms. Surely I'm not in love with him; love doesn't come that way. But I do feel him here—" Her right hand slid across her breast and stopped over her heart. A silver fish splashed the water, startling her. She gasped, quickly smiled. The trees cast purple shadows on the river. The sun shimmered through the trees and painted golden flowers on the boiling, singing stream.

No—love never came to a woman so abruptly; it did not come to a man either with such sweeping suddenness. But it was nice to imagine that she was in love. Stell was a hard woman; she had taken a man's place in the world and life had left her profoundly disappointed. She had worked and dreamed and lack of beauty in her life had made her dreams very drab and uninteresting. She had never tried very hard to find love; more than once she had turned away from opportunity. Oh, she had known men; she had snatched a romance here and there from the dust and heavy rumble of her wagons, but nothing had lasted.

So the thought that love had possibly come to her at last gave her encouragement. The song of the birds was sweeter to hear; the flowers seemed to be more vivid in their gorgeous raiment. She saw more color in the sky and in the trees and the metallic shimmer of the sun. Funny how different the thought made everything. Yes, it *was* funny—

6

IBERTY'S jumble and juxtaposition of stone and frame buildings and streets lay placid in the coffee-colored gloom. Captain Curtis was sure he could trust Lescott, and when they came to jail where Sheriff Decker was rest-

lessly pacing the floor, he got Lescott alone and talked to him.

It was a small room in which they sat; hot, with the smell of dust in it. The windows were open and the back door allowed what breeze there was to circulate through the office.

On the four walls were ornaments and trophies left by Decker's predecessors. Over the battered rolltop was an engraving of Abe Lincoln. A bench stood just inside the rear door, holding a water bucket, a gourd dipper and a basin. A wooden soap dish and towel rack hung over the bench. A rack against the wall held an assortment of firearms; saddle gear filled one corner of the room. The chairs had rawhide bottoms. There was a platform rocker on a small rag rug. A sharp piney odor ran rampant over the interior. There were no curtains at the barred windows. Curtis came to the point without mincing matters. He had but two choices; he would have to trust Lescott or drop him entirely. He could not go on feeling the man out; there was no immediate way in which to check him. He decided on the former choice. "I am taking you at face value," he said. "I am not suspicious by nature. You've been my friend from the time we met, and I appreciate your help. You saved my life. At least I feel that way about it. I value your comradeship, Lescott."

Lescott did not say anything; he did not think it necessary. However, he had made up his mind what he would do and what he wouldn't do. He would have nothing to do with the army. While in Liberty he wanted to be clear of responsibility to anyone, wanted to act as he pleased; he did not like the army. But he gave the Captain his respectful attention.

"I am here," the Captain said, lighting his cigar and leaning forward to peer closely at Lescott, "in the interest of the United States army. I am investigating the theft of rifles and ammunition from the Omaha Post. I figure the gun smugglers are holed up in this town. My purpose is to recover those firearms before they get into the hands of hostile Indians. I believe Mike Fanning and his Red Ball freight haulers are involved in nefarious business with the renegades and the Indians and are selling them guns and bullets. I have received certain information concerning Fanning. I need help and would like to have your cooperation. If you will keep your ear to the ground I shall see you're well paid for your work, Lescott."

The latter frowned. He did not like this proposal; he hated to have the soldier confide in him. He was not interested in the missing rifles, and had even smaller interest in the gun thieves. The only appeal he found in the situation was his desire to even scores with the boss of the Red Ball. That, of course, made the matter different; but it was not so vastly different he cared to risk his neck for the law. Uncle Sam meant practically nothing to him. He was steeped in the traditions of the South; nothing about the present form of government interested him. He was an unswerving Democrat; he had hated Lincoln and he would hate his successors, if for none other than party loyalty. The stars and stripes were nothing to Lescott but a piece of cloth. He had fought and sacrificed for his beliefs; he had become a fugitive only because he'd grown tired of murder and pillage. Bushwhacking was a form of war he'd liked in the beginning, but it had soured on him quickly. Men had perished under his rearing, plunging dun horse while trying to defend their homes and their loved ones; now war was something that nauseated him. He was glad it was over. He had fled from it all and he did not want to go back. Never!

"I don't like the owner of the Red Ball Freighters," he said. "But I have no interest in helping the government. However, if any information should fall into my hands which will prove of benefit to you, Captain, I'll be glad to turn it over to you, as a personal favor. I guess that's about all I have to say on the matter." He

got up and walked across the room and stopped and leaned back, touching the wall with his shoulder blades.

The Captain had expected this reaction. He did not understand why he had anticipated this refusal by Lescott to help the army, but it did not surprise him. He caught in Lescott's statements a repugnance for the victorious Federals. It was obvious that Lescott was a Southern Democrat who would never become reconciled to living under the present conditions of government—an unreconstructed Rebel. He sat with curving wisps of smoke around his head. Yet Captain Charley Curtis did not resent this; he did not believe it was wrong for a man to think as he pleased.

"I am glad you've made clear to me how you feel," the Captain said. "But I'd like to have you help me run down the gun smugglers who call themselves freight haulers. I want to snag their leader. He's capable of any crime to enhance his prosperity. He's a bad one, sure. I know how dangerous it is. And anyone caught meddling with Fanning's business will be treated roughly, possibly killed. If you care to help me I shall be glad to hear from you when you have anything to report on Mike Fanning's activities or the stolen guns. I thank you for what you've already done for me. I want you to know I consider you my friend; I stand ready to pay back my debt to you whenever you need my help."

It ended that way, with nothing promised from Lescott. The Captain let him out the back way. Lescott trampled down the dead cracking weeds and came out of the alley behind the hotel. He skirted the building and came back to the front steps.

He passed through the lobby, which was full of shadows from the coal oil lamps. He was cautious; he stopped in the hall and looked through the yellow light at his door. When he stepped inside he found nothing had been disturbed. His warbag and his saddle gear were where he had left them. Lescott had thought that Mike Fanning would investigate him, possibly search his room. But as far as he knew nothing had been done up to now.

He took a light bath and went out in the hall, filled his flowered water pitcher out of a barrel. He went back to his bedroom and shut the door. It was ten minutes later when somebody knocked and the sound tautened his nerves. He had heard no sound until the gentle knuckling on the thin panel had reached him. His nerves were bothering him slightly, something definitely unusual. Gun in hand he sidled to the door and slipped the thumblock back; when he inched the door open he saw Fay Jerrard looking in at him; pale; her black hair disheveled.

"I told you I might accept your invitation to drop in on you," she said. She came into the room and placed her shoulders against the wall and drew the Spanish shawl she wore close around her bare shoulders. "I hope you are as glad to see me as I am to see you. I have something to talk to you about. Do you mind if I am your guest for a while, Lescott?"

"I am glad," he said, and he closed the door.

SHE CARRIED a market-basket which contained sandwiches and two quart bottles of coffee, and a bottle of wine that had been imported from the Old Country, according to the label. She arranged the table and drew it up close to the street window and she pulled the blind so they could not be seen from down below on the opposite side of the thoroughfare. Although the town was quiet, they could hear a man cough and the light clump of boots on the sidewalks. It was very dark outside where the night had coagulated. The last kerosene lamp had been extinguished.

Again Lescott observed the beauty of the woman, and silently he found his admiration had become transformed into a living fascination. Her

taut yellow dress did not hide the graceful curves of her young body. She had that strange haunting perfume in her midnight hair and that same aliveness in her round shiny eyes. Few women had affected him like that. Fay Jerrard was one in a thousand who held the power to sway him from his better judgment.

"I have taken a fancy to you against my will," she said. "I know better than to play around with men like you. No woman can win; you are too strong, too vicious, and you have low-brow ideas about women. What can I expect of you? Nothing. I must take my chances and, if I lose, not say anything about it. You are big and strong and cruel; I saw the cruel part of you when you kicked Rufe Allan when he was down. Of course he would have booted you if the situation had been reversed. But—all the same it doesn't get around the fact that you are cruel."

It did not anger Lescott because she found fit to say those things to him; she was being frank. She had been foolish to gamble on getting out of this room when she had entered it the way she had. There was no decency that she was entitled to. He was cruel; he had driven himself to be cruel as the next man and he was aloof to pity. He could kill with little or no compunction. That toughening process had made his heart as unfeeling as leather and he'd been able to rebuff his greatest impulses if by doing so he could gain more from his lesser desires. *The man on the dun horse*—he was a flagrant picture from the outer edges of the Civil War, and he'd represented a defeated cause.

Well—he'd stalk this little lady. If she were playing a dubious game he would find it out and the price he'd demand for trying to make a fool out of him would be a rugged one. Should he find Mike Fanning behind her enterprise he would make Fanning pay, too. The boss of the Red Ball freight outfit would have to pay anyhow; he had a little score to settle with Fanning for setting his bully on him.

Without ostentatious effort Fay Jerrard had knocked down the barriers between them and created a familiarity so there was nothing strained, nothing difficult about their companionship.

It was a long black night and the curtains whispered at the windows in the furtive breeze. The smell of burned grass from the prairie reached him as he stood peering out across the balcony over the sidewalk. Lescott would not relinquish his purpose and would persist in his endeavor to find out more about the Red Ball's gigantic boss. He was sure the man's record would not bear a close scrutiny.

Fay's story was straight enough. She had come in with one of Fanning's caravans from Saint Joe. She had been broken in spirit by an unfortunate love affair. Her dark eyes glowed with a baffling fire, but the fire was affected by her changing moods, sometimes dimmed, sometimes brightened by her thoughts and impulses.

"He makes his headquarters at the *Paradise*," she said. "He seldom is to be found at his wagon yard. He lives here at this hotel, on this same floor. He's not in town now. He left to be gone until tomorrow. He loves faro and has lost bushels of money to Gunther, owner of the *Paradise*."

"Anything else?"

She took a step over to the end of the bed. "Yes, a lot of other things." She hesitated and crossed to the window, was obviously worried, at war with herself. He could imagine her fighting herself this way in the still darkness of the nights and of losing and of winning battles. It was the weak arguing with the strong. It was going against her better judgment, taking the things she knew she shouldn't have and denying the things she needed and which would help her. The weak and the strong! The saint and the sinner!

"But I can't talk to you about Mike

Fanning. I'm not interested in him."

LESCOTT thought she was lying but did not say so. He just kept watching her and she kept moving about in her strange restlessness. One minute she would do something and the next minute she would blame herself for having done it. He thought she was a different personality, she was different in everything, even in the gestures she made with her ringed hands.

He imagined he could tell when her mood changed. She was a woman of swiftly changing moods and as whimsical as they came.

"Why can't you tell me more about Mike Fanning?" His tone was casual, almost one of indifference. "He's a threat; he's dangerous; he's crooked; he's a murderer, and what else do we have? The man has an imposing mental stature; I can recall but one who was a match for him and he died at the age of twenty-six with his boots on; he took an overdose of castor oil. This Mike Fanning is a story-book character, maybe like the Giant in Jack-and-the-Beanstalk. You read that when you were a kid, didn't you?"

"Yes," she said. "But what I was getting at—Mike likes gunfighters; he likes to feel he is protected in case of trouble."

He said, speaking low, "That lets me out."

She reached out slowly and ran her right hand over the garish, flowered wall paper. The room had been recently decorated and was one of the best in the house. It was large and had three windows, one on the alley, which was open, and two in the front, which faced south and let in the cool breeze.

"But you are a gunfighter, aren't you?" Her voice did not betray her interest in this question, but he knew she was fishing for the right answer.

"Well, I can use a gun," he said modestly quiet. "I reckon most any man who has soldiered can use a gun, don't you?"

Her dark eyes showed little lighted lamps in their depths. "But all men don't wear their gun strapped down and the butts don't show notches, Mister Lescott." Then, "I can imagine a dozen scratches on those pearl butts..."

He smiled lazily and flicked his cigarette out the alley window. "I like it better when you call me Bruce," he said gently; "you did once before, you know."

"Well, I like Bruce," she admitted. She got up, with leisurely grace and crossed to the bureau against the wall. Here there was a large oval mirror and she studied her face in this. He watched her as she moved on over to the enormous four-poster bed and sat down on the edge of it. She reached out one small foot and kicked a platform rocker which was covered with gaudy calico. She watched it rock back and forth a minute. She turned her head and looked at him. "It costs you ten dollars a day to stay in this room, Bruce; they must've figured you were loaded for bear."

He chuckled and crossed to the alley window and stood framed in the saffron lamplight. Without looking at her, he said, "Well, I'm not exactly broke, Fay." He skewed round and walked slowly toward her. "Although I'm not a rich man—not as well heeled as Mike Fanning—I can pay for my keep."

She got up quickly and moved across the room to a front window and let the blind up. The moon shone in and the stars were like rhinestones on a blue gown. "This is a tough town," she said, wheeling and staring at him. "You don't know who to trust. There's no law here. Tom Decker's a drunk. He doesn't attend to business. Besides being a coward, he's lazy. They could kill you in the street and nothing would be done about it."

He crossed to the window and moved around to the door leading to the balcony over the sidewalk. A faint, suspicious sound reached him. He swung the door open, and stepped out into the night. The gold stain from the window showed him

two men moving with animal-stealth at him. They had climbed up over the balcony.

THE TWO ran at him in rough-shod fashion. More of Mike Fanning's work; they wouldn't let him rest. He was clipped on the shoulders and thrown back against the wall. He pushed up his hands and his knotted fists struck hard, twice, at a dancing face. He heard hard breathing in the dark. One of them grunted when Lescott's fist hit him on the chin.

They kept weaving in, giving him a beating. They had him pinned against the wall. They were shadows that moved swiftly and caused him to miss the blows he sent at them. He caught one of them on the jaw and drove that one clean back across the balcony. He hit the rail with a dull impact and fell, going backwards. Lescott saw his heels and heard him scream.

The surviving antagonist held him jammed flat against the door casing. Lescott bowed his shoulders and lifted them, heaving the man's hands away. He felt oily blood on his hairy knuckles. He made a rapid stride forward and tore into his opponent. He was silent and quick and deadly; there was nothing left in him but a wild desire to destroy. He rushed his man against the balcony's rail and drove a smashing lick into his face. The other hung on. Lescott hit him several times. He broke the man's grip on him shirt and crashed his knuckles into the other's nose. The bridge of the man's nose was pulpy and soft when he struck him again in the same place. His adversary grabbed at him and went over the rail and Lescott heard him drag a cry out of his throat. He thumped against the plank walk and was still.

Lescott was dripping blood from his nose when he turned and reeled through the opening into his bedroom. The girl caught him, steadied him on his feet and her smooth hands moved over his face and through his hair. He limped to the bed and she quickly turned and shut the door. She was white as death but there was a grim look on her mouth. He said crossily:

"Why did you stay in here? Were you afraid?"

"Mike would have killed me if I had lifted a hand to help you. This town is full of iron devils, killers every one of them. Mike keeps his own hands clean but he lets others do his dirty work for him. He can hire a knife any time; I am exposed to his hellions, and can't protect myself. This is the town where hell was born and death is your sole reward when you try to do anything about it. I am sorry—but you seem to have come out very well."

She pressed her lips to his mouth and then rushed quickly to the flowered water pitcher and got a towel. She wet it and came back and bathed his face and stopped the blood from coming out of his nose. The soft warmth of her body soothed him. He understood; she had done the best thing she could have done. She had stayed in with the boss of the Red Ball freightline and consequently she would be able to help out if Lescott needed her for anything. He consoled himself with that thought.

7

CAPTAIN Charley and Old Pete sat in the jail office and smoked. The savor of the cigar Charley had given Pete was relishing to the old man.

"You understand I don't want to do Tom Decker no harm. But he stands in with the wrong element, son." Pete removed the cigar from his mouth and gazed at it. "Mike rules this town. It ought to be called Helltown. Captain, there ain't another place like it on this here earth, if you ask me. Tom can't get away from Mike."

"The sheriff's in Mike's pay, is that it?"

"Yup; I hope you don't think I'm doin' wrong in telling you. I hope you see my object; it's to make this town a fit place for decent folks. You understand me, Captain?"

The Captain nodded. When he spoke his voice was gently pitched. It had never been any other way to him—that is it hadn't completely. But did Mike Fanning now have the stolen guns and ammunition? "You think Big Mike is the leader of the gun smugglers?" he asked.

"Mike's a mean, lowdown hombre," Pete said. "But I don't know; I'm not sure. How about Stell Marshall? The Red Ball and The Prairie Queen have been at it hammer and tongs and one is feared the other will out him entirely. They've fought all up and down the trails in and out of here, and there has been more than one killing, which was laid to Stell Marshall. She was on the ground first, though, and Mike horned in on her with his bigger, fancier wagons. Of course when you come right down to it, Mike could be the gunrunner; sure, I admit he could. But I can't eliminate Stell Marshall as a suspect."

Charley agreed there was a reason to suspect the Yellow-Headed Panther. The Red Ball had been too strong as competition and she had suffered severe losses. Seeing she was going broke maybe she had resorted to the contrabrand business of peddling the stolen guns to the Indians.

"Big Mike's an interesting character," Pete said, a moment later. "He's a mean gunfighter. I have seen him whip men with his bare fists till their pants fell off. Allan, for example, wasn't a good mouthful for the Red Ball boss. Fanning give him a worse beatin' than Lescott did, and quicker. Mike's got a gal, too—a doodle, if you ask me. He uses her to find out what he wants to know. Her name's Fay Jerrard and she's crazy about Mike. Every stranger that comes to town runs into Fay sooner or later and falls for her sweet line of chatter. Then he wakes up with more than a headache."

The Captain rubbed his blue jacket and looked quickly at the door. He had heard a sound outside, and now there was a hard rasping of heels on the board sidewalk. But the sound stopped and silence came again.

"That girl's right in the swim with the Red Ball outfit," Pete continued; "she'd shoot you in the back if there was enough in it." He moved the cuspidor beside him. He rubbed his mouth and added thoughtfully, "That woman would do anythng; I wouldn't put anything past her. If you didn't know the stripe of that cat animal, she would pull the wool over your eyes slicker than a whistle. She would stab her own mother in the back."

At that moment somebody knocked on the street door and the two men exchanged quick glances.

The Captain sat still on his chair. Pete pushed back his chair and got up heavily. There was no sound in his tread when he approached the door. The old deputy lowered his hand to the knob. With the other hand he turned the brass key in the lock. When he drew the door open a scant six inches, a sepulchral voice outside spoke dismally: "I'm lookin' for the sheriff. There has been trouble in town and we need him."

Curtis shook his head at Pete, indicating he was not to open the door. Something in the voice had aroused the Captain's suspicions. With agility, he got to his feet. Just then Pete stumbled away from the door and two men came roughly into the room; they had pushed Pete away from the threshold.

CAPTAIN CHARLEY never had a chance to draw his gun. The two ruffians were followed by other riders who hurled themselves upon the soldier and beat old Pete to the floor. Charley found he had more than he could cope with and felt hard blows in his face and body taking a savage toll in strength. He retaliated as often as possible, but the odds were too great; Pete was already out cold, blood curling from his head.

Those cruel knuckles kept find-

ing the Captain. Two men were after him, they moved with feline quickness and had him just about unconscious. One of the men said, speaking curtly, "That's enough. Stop it, you fellows. Can't you see he's out on his feet. Fetch him along. Tex, you wipe his mouth and tie your handkerchief around it so he can't give us away. We've been here too long now. No...Hell, no—let the old man alone. Don't kill him. We have no business killing him."

The Captain saw how useless it was trying to win against such heavy odds. Silently he gave in. There was nothing but a small ray of hope left. This diminished as he thought of it. But he would watch for his chance to turn the tables.

He was bound up with a rope from his hands to his feet, with just enough slack in his leg shackles to walk by taking short steps. The light-haired rider and his companion, a man called Tex, led the Captain out to the tie-rail and a piebald hitched there. Blood rivered from Charley's crushed nose. Although he felt no pain, every muscle in his body ached and one finger had begun to swell out from the knuckle so that it was stiff and sore.

"Better go back in there and fix the old man good and proper," Tex suggested. "We don't want to leave him behind to squeal on us."

"Shut your mouth," the light man snapped; "we won't kill nobody till we have had orders to do it."

Tex assembled his men and they jumped into their saddles. Tex walked back across the solid planks to close the jail door. His boots hammered nails into the boards in the eerie stillness of the street. When the horses moved away in silence, with the squeak of leather, and the acid dust drifted up around the riders, the moonlight bathed the cavalcade with gilding radiance. It was cool and the shadows were long on the trail they followed.

The Captain knew they had passed the blacksmith shop. Behind them lay the toy drab buildings, huddled in the gold of the moon. The cupped hoofs of the covert horses fired the dust in gunpowder puffs and then, suddenly, the man with the light complexion, whipped his Morgan into a run. Grouped close together his companions followed. The Captain could see off on the rim of the world a burst of light that gradually spread into a deeper, more metallic shimmer. The riders swerved when the trail bent, and the horses struck with a drumming staccatto a wagon bridge. They struck a swifter, steadier pace. The piebald was his own steed. The renegades had abducted the horse, too, for this purpose. The ruse had been ingeniously planned. The Captain wondered if the outlaws hadn't been tipped off that he was alone, with only Pete to help him. He was sure these were the same riders who had saved his life from the ambuscade trap set for him by the three now dead drygulchers. But the mystery remained baffling and he got no satisfaction from twisting the thoughts about in his mind.

They crossed the Arkansas River and Charley took stock of the landmarks he observed in the brightening world. The aroma of dry hay and cool water, mingled with wild flower perfume, was quite bracing. It was pleasant traveling through the dawn tints. About twenty minutes of riding brought them to a slower pace. The leader's Morgan had been slowed to a walk fifty feet ahead of the small group of mounted men. Charley was crowded between two husky Morgans. The riders were glum, silent and mistrusting. Then the Captain saw a spiral of wood smoke rise above the tops of a clump of cottonwoods. Tree balm was sharp.

Dew sparkled on the decadent grass. The sun made a pinkish glow. It was like peering at a cathedral window. The head man turned his horse suddenly, lifted his hand again and urged his mount through a pole-gate that had been left open. One of the men behind Charley dismounted, led his horse by the reins and put the pole across the opening. The spiral of smoke was more vivid now. Silently they rode toward the

trees, through the mauve curtain. The whistle and low murmur of the boiling Arkansas River came through the cottonwoods.

SUDDENLY looming before them was a cabin, square and low-roofed. A wide stone chimney stood at one end of the structure, and behind the house was a lean-to where the men tethered their horses. They unbooted their saddle carbines and filed around the house, one man prodding the Captain with a rifle and making him walk straight ahead of him to the front of the cabin. The door stood open. Bracket lamps on the walls cast a weird glow on a woman's face which Charley saw just beyond the threshold. She moved forward. Accustomed to the shine of the lamps now, the Captain took stock of the long room before him. A small fire burned in a large stone fireplace, and a crude table occupied the middle of the floor. There was the smell of cooked food lingering over the interior. The windows were closed and curtained. As soon as the riders filed in behind him Tex shut the door.

Stell Marshall! Charley needed no introduction to this attractive woman who eyed him in stony silence. Then she turned her head so as to take in both Tex and John Howard. She said to the blond leader of the cavalcade in a soft voice: "This is a surprise. I hope you didn't go to too much trouble to snare our friend here. Of course I have been anxious to meet Mr. Curtis. I know he is simply delighted to see me; I presume he thought he'd been abducted by Mike Fanning's renegades. No doubt he'll feel better now that he knows he is in the hands of such a refined group as ours. How about it, Tex?"

Not once had she looked at him. She wore a red shirt, open down the front, and levis, which made her slim waist seem so small in diameter a man could span it with his hands. Her deep breasts were prominent in the tautness of her shirt, and her hair was in a cascade that fell below her stately shoulders. The mouth was small and pouty, but in the high cheeks was an arrogance and a pride he had seldom seen in a woman's face. Her eyes were wide open and held a certain candor which was disarming. But Charley had had a previous encounter with Stell Marshall and he knew the cold cruelty of which she was capable.

He bowed mockingly and removed his hat. "It is indeed a pleasure," he said sarcastically, "to meet you again, Madam Scheherazade."

"Oh, so you read fairy tales." She laughed, not forcing it, but with real mirth. "How long has it been since we met in Saint Joe, Charley?"

He said softly, staring at her with a fixed grin on his face. "My memory serves me well. Six months and four days and I've still got the scar on my face you put there with your whip."

"You tried to search my wagon and I wouldn't let you. I'd left the Robidoux post with a load of window glass. You thought I was a gun-smuggler; you've thought so ever since."

She moved closer to him. Although he was unarmed, they seemed afraid to trust him. After he'd shot up the train at Saint Joe and held the wagons there for four days for investigation, the Prairie Queen outfit figured he was bad medicine. But he had released them after holding them in temporary confinement at Robidoux's residence. Joe Robidoux, known to the Indians as the Little White Father had disbelieved in the Yellow-Headed Panther's guilt as a gun runner. The Captain had found the old founder of Saint Joe sound in his opinion. Stell Marshall then had come back into the picture when guns she claimed were planted in one of her schooners were found by a troop of cavalry under Colonel Mitchell. The latter had held the Yellow-Headed Panther prisoner several days.

She again had been exonerated by the head of the post who had questioned her and had his answers confirmed by a detailed investigation. The rifles had been planted by Indians in the pay of the real gun

smugglers, Mitchell explained to the higherups. They had accepted his version of the happening. Then Captain Curtis had been assigned to check her again.

"I hope you don't go off half cocked," Charley said dispiritedly. "I am not your enemy. Maybe you know something about this gun smuggling and robbery business I don't know."

She shrugged, lighted a cigarette and held the burning Lucifer and gazing at it said, "You suspect me. You're trying to get something on me. I brought you out here because I respect your brains. I didn't want you getting in my hair. No matter what you say, Captain, you will continue to be my prisoner. I might even slit your throat."

The wild creatures had awakened and slunk about on padded paws. The trees were virtually littered with birds of all kinds. There was a delicate and plaintive twittering of yellow canaries. The forest awoke from its slumber with squirrels barking and blue jays quarreling. The night had given in its blackness completely when the horizon began to flush with a rosy brightness.

8

DESTINY had to be peopled with great men and greater women to leave its indelible mark. Out of the Civil War era emerged such characters as John Brown, who was hanged at Harper's Ferry for daring to intrude himself upon govermental rights; and there was Lee, who bravely waged a losing fight, then Grant, who gave hope to the underdog with his generous peace at Appomattox, the man in whom the Nation had lost confidence, rises to a great pinnacle. Besides the aforementioned there were lesser luminaries such as Quantrill, brutal and coarse and merciless, who raised himself on the wings of posterity as a dyed-in-the grain killer and is never to be blotted out because Destiny needed him. Wild Bill Anderson, Arch Clements, Frank James (brother of the infamous and undying Jesse) and others of the same ilk, breathed into the pages of dull history lightning flashes of sensationalism.

Epoch-making incidents began and ended with Lawrence, Kansas, the city of the graveyards, because nothing in the War of the Rebellion matched it for sheer debauchery and scoundralism. Oh, there were more sordid incidents, of course, but Lawrence and the deep river of its blood, had its place and is still as fresh as the day it happened, in the minds and talents of meritorious historians.

No wonder Kansas hated the Missouri brigade that burned the homes and blasted the lives of the Lawrence inhabitants. It was like a fabulous tale from the East. And from this inferno rode Bruce Lescott, who hoped to drown his memories of the lunatic rape of the Kansas town. Strange that he should seek solace and freedom in the state of Kansas, seeking to bury himself in the untamed west where men did not ask questions and where the six gun was still master of any situation involving an inhabitant's personal security. But the rape of Lawrence which had decided him upon his future course was still a vivid scar on his brain and his effort to banish the ugly memory was completely futile. He stomped the board sidewalks with a covert alertness, knowing he had murdered and fearing that he had traveled so far beyond the pale in his exile that nothing remained, that nothing, no matter how powerful, would free him from the dark prison of his mind.

And so, when he found the woman, painted and spangled though she be, he reached out hungrily and embraced her, seeing her as a beacon whose light would steer him safely through the shoals. Half of it was because he wanted to believe in her and half of it was an honest trust in

her. There were moments when instinct warned him that after all was said and done she was still a woman whose past was not savory, who was not without greed, and who ambition struck Lescott as a part of her nature that could not be overcome.

He had seen deep breathing disturb her breasts and deep feeling flame her cheeks; he had felt her shapely hands closed tightly upon him, and though she was not far from that first maturity which followed girlhood, she had garnered enough about life to increase her value in any man's eyes.

Fay Jerrard had confessed that she had been Big Mike Fanning's sweetheart, but she had promised that she would never be again. As they sat there on the porch roof over the street and watched the red sun emblazon the skyline she was serene in her composure and her delicate face was outlined in the brightening light. She was a beautifully shaped girl, with features that were quick to express her thoughts, with laughter and love of life sparkling in her eyes. A sense of proprietorship engulfed Lescott as he studied her. He would never feel any other way toward her.

Her voice fell to a low throaty whisper. "I wish I had known you before I met Mike and then I wouldn't have had reason to regret anything." This was one of the rare intervals when she appeared weak. Then he saw her will come back and she radiated a strength he had seen in few women. She slowly pulled herself together, got up and walked to the balustrade and leaning down, peered along the deserted street. She turned to look at him again, and her lips were soft and her eyes half closed. "Listen, Bruce, you must not underestimate Fanning. He is one of the most dangerous men on the frontier. His talents include that of being an expert with his guns. Besides, he is a brutal fighter and I saw him one day when he tromped Rufe Allan in the dust. I don't know of any man who could match you unless it's Mike Fanning."

"Never mind that," he said.

"But it's something I shall worry about. You have not confided in me; you have not told me anything. It is known that twice you sided a lawdog as they call them. Charley Curtis is one of the most tenacious army officers in this country. He's as dangerous with his guns as Fanning and people around here have been expecting them to meet. If they ever do I don't know who'll win; they'll probably shoot themselves to ribbons. But you sided Charley Curtis; Mike wonders why. He will keep on wondering until he finds out. As long as he is uncertain you'll be safe. If he finds out and what he finds out doesn't please him, they'll be carting you off to Boothill."

"Mike Fanning wants Curtis dead and he set his hounds on the Captain; is that it?"

"Yes, I don't deny I know that," Fay Jerrard said. "And Mike will keep on until he gets him. The time is bound to come when, if Mike's hired killers fail often enough, Mike will do the job himself. That's what everybody around Liberty is looking forward to, the showdown between Mike and Charley Curtis."

"Why doesn't Curtis arrest him?" Lescott asked.

"Because he has no reason to," she said. "If he had the evidence he wants against Mike, Curtis wouldn't wait a minute. There's one thing about that man, Bruce—he isn't afraid of anything. His courage and his honesty have made him a number of friends, all hoping he wins out over Mike."

LESCOTT nodded, tapered up a cigarette and she bent over his chair, took his match from his fingers and lighted it for him. She pressed her moist lips against his forehead. She gently pinched his face. Her vitality was magnetic and inspiring.

"The Red Ball freight line owner has a gang of renegades working for him," he said. "He robs the army posts when there is no protection there, steals the rifles and ammunitions which he sells to hostile red men. He has a way of getting things

done, probably buys off some dubious white scout in charge of the post while the soldiers are away on some mission and the post not so well handled. I imagine that is why Captain Curtis is on his trail."

She did not say anything. She traced little circles on the table with her long forefinger dipped in wine. A glass of the red fluid sparkled in the lamplight but Lescott shoved it away from him. It was cool out here, cooler than in the room which held the stifling heat of the day.

"You mustn't make such statements," she cautioned; "if you said that out in the street you'd be killed."

He twisted around and glared at her. "Well, I know it's true—"

"How do you know it's true?"

He said sharply. "You know it is and your face says so."

She waited a minute, then answered. "Yes, it's so. But how you found out is beyond me. You seem to have the talent it takes to find out a lot in no time. But you'd better leave Big Mike alone. People around here are afraid to cross him—"

"Stell Marshall wasn't," he intercepted her. "Was she?"

She shook her head, walked to the railing and looked over into the street and beat the insects away from her face. She turned and put her back to the stout rail and her hands behind her. When she opened her scarlet satin mouth her teeth gleamed. She shut her lips then, and made another try at speaking what was in her mind.

"I have placed my entire confidence in you." Her voice was smooth, silky. "I'll do anything for you. I'll stand by you, and defend you, and die by your side if it comes to that. If there is any reason you are interested in Mike Fanning's Red Ball activities, I'll save you the trouble of having to risk your life to find out. I have gone off the deep end for you, Mister."

There was no eagerness in the way he went about the next move. He made it with a sorrowful, swift tautening in his chest. "Where does he hide his contrabrand freight? Where does he put the rifles and the ammunition and the leather goods he takes from the soldiers?" There was no anxiety in his voice, nothing to imply the importance of his questions. There was nothing to infer he was stalking her.

He was in stealthy pursuit of information. This was for Captain Curtis. Yet if Lescott had been impelled to tell why he was lending the soldier his support he would have been quite unable to explain.

"I don't mind telling you," she said. There was some display of reluctance in her speech. "I guess perhaps I've gone too far in too short a time. I don't know anything about you, but a woman will do these things if she has any fire in her blood or adventure in her veins. I can't help being what I am. If you betray me you will betray your best friend."

"There is a deserted ranch called the Circle C close to Liberty. I imagine the stolen guns are cached out there around the half-ruined house. I am sure there is more loot there, too. The Indians meet there and transact their illegal business with the boss of the Red Ball."

Lescott shrugged his wide shoulders. He was not pleased with himself, was far from exultant. He did not say anything more on the subject. And she spoke again, earnestly, her eyes shining like stars.

"Big Mike trusted me and I have done him an injustice. But he is beyond the law or the power of the law in Liberty. Nothing can touch him."

Yes, Fay Jerrard had gone all the way with him. He lifted his shoulders. Lescott had a fair picture of her now. Lamplight was strong against her; it lighted her hair. She was staring at him, asking his attention and compelling it. Her lips were vivid against her skin; the half smile was arresting. He knew she was reading the effect she was having on him in his eyes. He hadn't been quite able to keep his thoughts out of his eyes if one peered closely

enough at them. The rebuffs of life had tried to destroy her finer qualities, but had failed to do so entirely. She was a woman whose stubborness would hold her moored to her objective. She was a smart woman, and her cunning showed as something too subtle to understand.

He would laugh at the idea of the world's civilization. This was a delusion—a grand delusion. Civilization was in knee pants and, although growing, was still quite infantile. There would always be Bruce Lescotts and Fay Jerrards; love and passion and the joyous animal would always lift its head in moments of excitement.

Lescott had found it hopeless to strive for betterment; none of the things he had deliberately murdered in his soul would be recovered and restored.

The silence of the room was broken only by the creak of the floor boards as he paced about, restless and chained to apprehension. Peace of mind did not come with contentment. He was content with her, but he was afraid because he knew it would not last, that nothing lasted.

He did not feel freedom; he failed completely in his effort to capture the sensation of being free. He felt burnt out and helpless. The sun's color was never the same. Today the sky was not the color it was yesterday. The time would never come again when he could sing and ride the trails with a carefree abandon. Each day the man did not understand tautened his grip upon him. He lifted the bottle and drank deeply and set the bottle down reluctantly. Even in this bottle there was no forgetfulness.

She had fallen asleep and lay on the bed with her hair hiding her face. He walked over to the bed and peered down and wished he could always keep her. But a man's ardent wishes are seldom granted by the wish-master.

* * *

A GREAT man is measured not by his accomplishments. Stell Marshall had judged Charley Curtis, not by what he had said or what he had threatened to do to her, but by what he had done to others of the lawless breed. She suspected that he was the best lawman the west had produced and would go on to a high plane if allowed to live. It did not thrill her to think she could frustrate his ambition. He was within her power; a man who was beginning to be great was within her power and her sentence was death—she would kill him rather than be killed.

She did not go into the room where he was imprisoned, with the blinds drawn so there was no light and where he could not see his hands before his face. She would leave him there until she was ready, until she had completely made up her mind just how to go about disposing of him so that he would never enter her life again. Lately she had found reason to hope to live, though less than a week ago she'd been careless with her life, not caring when the time came to die. She was unable to understand fully why the change had come, why she had begun to get more out of life than she'd experienced in a long time. Maybe it was because she was hungry for a man—the one man—the man who had stood in her presence less than five minutes but who would live in her memory if she lived to be a thousand years old. The magic of those five minutes—

She paced the floor, wondering if Lescott had received the letter John Howard had left at the livery stable for him. Would he come riding for her, to see what she wanted? Would she ever see him again? What would she say to him, how would she explain her interest in him? For the first time since she'd turned fugitive Stell was up against a problem she could not work. The solution continued to evade her as the morning's sun rose higher and the heat became more pronounced. She had sent her riders over to the ranch house to see if it were habitable, thinking she'd move in—not for a permanent abode, but to occupy it until she was ready to leave

this country. Perhaps she'd be here a week or ten days yet; she didn't know.

The sudden report of a gun startled her and sent her rushing to the door of the cabin. She peered out cautiously and the sun was in her eyes. She ducked her head, shielded her eyes with her hand and stared off in direction whence the shot had come. She saw a spiral of smoke drifting leisurely away from a wild gooseberry bush.

Too late she saw the sun glint off a rifle barrel and a slug tore a chunk out of the door casing. The bullet had missed her not more than an inch. She ran back into the house, seized a saddle carbine, and crept back to the door. Alert now, alert and alone except for the prisoner in the next room, she felt her heart pounding savagely and nervously ejected a spent cartridge from the gun. She had shot a rabbit that morning for breakfast.

Stell Marshall's markmanship had never been doubted by anyone who had ever heard of her. She steeled herself and crouching just inside the door, drew a bead on the gooseberry bush. There was no movement behind the barrier. The target was motionless, there was no breeze to stir the vines. It was less difficult to see inside the house than it was to see out. The sun streamed down in gilded fury and the sweat ran off her face. The heat had become stifling.

At first she thought she was about to be attacked by prowling Indians, but she discarded this thought because Indians would have swarmed down upon her or would have remained concealed until ready to attack. They were too cunning to risk a fight when they could conquer their foe by surprise. No, there was one man out there—a white man—and he had overplayed his hand. She did not fear him; she considered herself a good match for any man. He had changed his position. He was no longer hidden by the gooseberry bush. Stell moved closer to the door. She listened intently and heard the sound of a scuffing boot close against the front wall of the cabin. She jumped to her feet, started backwards just as a long shadow fell across the threshold. The next moment found her struggling desperately to break a man's hold on her arms. The gun was twisted ruthlessly from her hands and she was hurled half way across the cabin, striking the table and toppling over a chair. She did not stand there waiting for something to happen; she rushed forward and closed in on the interloper before he could resume his attack on her or cover her with the gun in his hands. He had thrown her gun out the door.

She struck him with her clenched fist, shoved him when he reeled away. She was quick and deadly and merciless. Stell knew she was fighting for her life; she was trapped and she'd have to smash her way out of the trap. The reward on her head was sufficient to warrant her death; this man had recognized her and was after the price offered for her.

IT WAS A raw, unceasing struggle. The odds were against Stell Marshall. The man was taller and wider and stronger. Only her speed enabled her to evade his long reaching arms. He groped for her, a grin on his bearded face. Once he almost cornered her against the wall, but she ducked under his arms and scuttled out of his reach again. He was getting mad; he was impatient. All the time Stell was looking for a weapon, something to even the odds between them. She picked up the kerosene lamp on the table and threw it at his head. The lamp missed him and broke into fine pieces against the fireplace. He had her hemmed in again and made a cross of his long arms so she couldn't get around him. He came closer, his steps slow and ponderous and the grin more pronounced than ever.

She crouched, her reddish sandy hair was in her eyes. Her breathing

rasped and her deep breasts moved up and down. She jumped this way, then in the other direction. He stood there, waiting; he was not to be fooled by her cleverness. There was no way in which she could get around or under those powerful arms. He had cornered her. She happened to remember that behind her, on the mantel, was a Bowie knife.

The man must have guessed her intentions for he suddenly took another step forward. He still kept those heavy arms out so she couldn't run past him. She knew he meant to lunge and grab her. Her despair deepened.

9

BRUCE LESCOTT was awakened by a voice calling his name and a rapping on his bedroom door. It was well after sunup and as he lifted himself from the bed, he heard the slamming of doors and voices in the empty, silent street. He was alone; three hours ago Fay Jerrard had slipped away from him and gone to her own quarters. He uttered not a sound as he hurriedly buckled his shell belt around his waist, after sliding his feet into his light military boots. When he unlocked the door and opened it an inch, he stood back out of the way of any possible bullet the knocker might send through the opening.

"Mister Lescott! Mister Lescott! I'm sorry but I got a letter for you." It was Raymond, the livery stable hostler who stood in the hall and thrust a letter toward him. His grimy hand shook. His eyes were wide but sleepy and he seemed pale and upset.

Lescott took the epistle and glanced at it. The handwriting was that of a man, heavy and scrawled so it was hardly legible, but he made out his name.

"A gent with blond hair and wearin' his guns strapped down give me a silver dollar to deliver this," Raymond said. "I didn't think it was so important because he said it didn't have to be given to you till mornin'. I hope it ain't bad news. I couldn't leave the barn or would have brung it sooner. I hope—"

Lescott nodded and said, "You run on back to your job, kid; I'll see you later on. Take good care of my horse. I'll probably be over there before long and you feed him right away."

The boy grinned, touched the brim of his slouch hat and raced noiselessly down the corridor. Lescott walked back into the room after shutting and thumb-latching the door. He sat down on the bed, the sun falling through the open window upon the sheet of crumpled paper.

Dear Sir: You spared the life of a woman who would like to see you as soon as possible.

Please ride out to the Circle C. Ranch.

A crude map was penciled on the paper and this depicted the exact location of the place.

You will find a line cabin not far off the road situated in a clump of cottonwoods. You are guaranteed safety. There will be no foul play and you will receive the treatment accorded an honest guest."

A FRIEND.

It quickly entered Lescott's mind that the "Friend" referred to was Stell Marshall. No doubt in some uncanny way she had defined that he was a fugitive and that they had something in common. Well, there was no telling what would come of the meeting. And so, because he was intrigued and knew he would not rest if he did not go, he made up his mind not to ignore the letter. The light-headed rider who had left the invitation was John Howard, the man he had encountered at the old mill.

He walked down the stairway and stopped at the desk. He gave the dandified clerk a note he had hurriedly written to Fay Jerrard, but he

did not tell the singer where he was going. He recalled what she had said about Mike Fanning's interest in the Circle C., also that she had said the contrabrand rifles from the Omaha Post might be hidden there. What was the Yellow-Headed Panther doing at the line cabin? He wondered if she had met the boss of the Red Ball freight line. These questions were in his mind as he stomped along the board walk toward the livery stable. He decided to get a bite of food and entered the *Red Moon Cafe.*

A red-headed girl with a sad smile and troubled eyes served him. She had a bushel of freckles. The sheriff had told Lescott that his daughter worked at the cafe and he made up his mind that this girl had to be Willa Decker. She put a stack of wheat cakes before him and a cup of hot coffee. "Charley Curtis was kidnaped last night and Deputy Pete was savagely beaten," she said. "You are Lescott. My father described you."

He nodded, stirred quickly by the news. His concern was greater than he cared to feel. The girl's face was a battleground of memories that stamped it with grief. She was nervous and there was a tautness in her manner; she was a woman afraid and fear does strange things to a woman.

"What happened to old Pete?" he asked casually, sampling his steaming hot coffee.

"He was terribly mistreated," she said. "Father says Pete and Captain Curtis were there alone. Charley spent the night with Pete at the office. The jailer must have let them in and they hammered him black and blue and left him unconscious. They took Charley with them. Father immediately organized a posse."

"Strange," he said.

She said, catching a deep breath. "The Yellow-Headed Panther struck again. She has lost all reason and has turned savage. She does not think anything of taking a human life. She has become a cruel and dangerous person. She will have Charley murdered by her tough freight haulers, or she will kill him with her own hands. There is nothing you can put past that woman."

He slowly finished eating. He shoved back from the counter. "If I were you," he said, "I'd stop worrying. Where did the posse go?"

"Toward Grant's mill. Stell Marshall was almost trapped there after she killed so many men here in the street. Dad thinks she's got a hiding place in vicinity of the mill and has gone there with the most fearless men he could round up. If I don't hear from them soon, I think I'll ride out and join them. I wish we had never heard of those freight lines."

SHE THOUGHT a great deal of Charley Curtis, Lescott thought. He paid his check and went to the door. She looked back with the screen open. "Keep your head, Miss," he said; "everything will be all right." He went on out into the sun-heat and stalked toward the livery stable. He had never seen such a wide street. The close-bunched falsefronts were the smallest buildings he had seen since coming west, but he knew the width of the street made them seem smaller. He held his head erect, walking down the sidewalk past the *King George Feed Store,* paused in the doorway of the *Pride and Joy* billiard parlor, and then went swinging on his way toward the livery stable. He saw a sign that read, *Countess Ilona—Imported Millinery, the Latest in My Lady's Headgear.* The sign amused him. Countess Ilona stood in the window, buxom, with twin chins, small eyes and enormous glass earrings. She was definitely Russian.

Sunlight slanted into the dust of the thoroughfare, filtering into the blistered surfaces of a Concord that had been unhitched at the curb in front of the Wells Fargo Express Company station. It stained the windows pink; the dirty windows seemed to resent anything as clean as sunlight and huddled back so the wooden awnings kept the sun off them. The brightness was metallic and moved inward, polishing the alleys, silvering some objects, gilding others, and some corners were enveloped in

a lemon pallor. Every ounce of filth and ugliness was revealed; but at the same time it was surprising how clean some of the windows were, as well as clean doorsteps. A man was using a broom briskly in front of a barber shop. Last night to Bruce Lescott the town had borne an air of false mystery, but this was gone now.

A dog lay in the dust, breathing hard, and the beast rose on all fours, too miserably hot to stay in the sun. But because of its laziness it did not go far and dropped again in the golden pool of heat and misery.

He went into the barn, into its rancid stillness. The boy had his horse ready; he had polished the metal ornaments until they shone brightly and the bridle embellishments sparkled like genuine rubies and emeralds. "Don't forget, Raymond," he said. "When I come back, I want to see you dressed up." He gave the boy another gold eagle.

Raymond said excitedly, "You be careful, Mister Lescott. The man who gave me that note for you is a gunfighter. He had his guns strapped down."

Jokingly Lescott said, "I'm a gunfighter, too, son."

* * *

HE HAD traveled less than a mile when floating dust rose above a hilltop. It rippled across the azure sky like a banner. Lescott pulled his dun to a halt. There was a big cottonwood in the road and he dismounted behind the tree. A rumbling sound and a loud clatter of wheels broke in upon the placidity. The sounds grew. He slid his carbine from the saddle boot. His blue eyes were clamped upon the trail over the hill. Then he saw a freight wagon drawn by six horses sweeping his way. It rocked and lunged.

The black line of the whip sailed over the horses and cracked like a gun. The driver yelled frantically and the front team strained against the load. The wagon weaved and rocked dangerously as it came down the slope. It was a large freighter, longer and wider than most of the type. Behind it, riding madly and brandishing firearms came a cordon of men, their shouts rebounding against the thunder of the avalanching wagon.

The heavy wheels lumbered, clattered and rolled up thick dust that screened the pursuers. Coldly Lescott raised his carbine, levelled it and shot the foremost man from his mount. He saw the other rear backwards and fall and the riderless horse came on, pounding the trail ahead of the others.

Twice Lescott took aim and fired. The crash of gunfire halted the cavalcade and they whirled their steeds in the clouding dust. Now Lescott fired over them, not seeking another life. As they raced back over the hill they were shielded by the boiling dust. They disappeared over the summit of the elevation.

Calmly Lescott slipped the carbine back into the saddle boot and picked up his reins. He had seen a garish picture on the canvas wall of the freighter. A woman in a sunbonnet and the words *The Prairie Queen* were distinguishable. The wagon thundered past him, and the driver, waving his hat, yelled at Lescott. "Mike Fanning's men back there—" and he tossed a kiss to the man who sat aboard the dun. The heavy wagon roared out of sight.

Funny, Lescott thought. He lit a cigarette.

This was the narrow trail he had followed into Liberty; this was the road back to Lawrence. The thought brought a slight convulsion of repugnance. Day and night his mind remained fixed upon the inglorious past. Not for long at a time was he free; he was the slave, the fool, the victim. He hated the conscience that wouldn't let him rest.

Finally the weight of the moment bore down upon him and his thoughts turned to Charley Curtis and his predicament. He knew he was headed for the place where, if the Captain was alive, he was being held a captive. But what did he owe Curtis? The man was not much more than a stranger to him. He had never done him any favors, but Lescott had done

him several; not perhaps only a couple, but those had been very important favors, yet he could not say he even liked Curtis.

Besides, he was a fugitive and Curtis was death to fugitives. He knew how Stell Marshall thought. She killed to survive; she had kidnaped the soldier because as long as he lived he'd be a dire threat to her, and if she could get rid of him she would have no worries in that direction. He did not blame the woman. She had killed the Captain's father—

He recalled her face vividly as she lay on the pile of sacks in the mill. He had wiped the blood out of her eyes and had been stunned by her beauty; She had lacked the roughness, the crudeness, he had expected to find. There was a soft delicacy in her face. The steel there had come as a coat she had applied after bitter disappointments that had left her hurt and broken in spirit. She'd had to fight to get the steel she needed, the same as he had fought for his; they'd gone through a toughening process because nature had not equipped them for the careers they had been impelled to follow. Running a freight line was a tough business, not a woman's job.

He had been riding for perhaps twenty minutes when he heard a gunshot somewhere ahead and not very close. The dim echoes was thrown across the fields, one single, protracted echo. Gunfire had always started something to jumping in his nerves, and he noticed Missouri was acting strangely and snorting, so because the dun had been through danger and was able to sense it with that fine instinct that is given a horse. He knew the peaceful vista held something besides heat—tortured inanimate scenes and animal life. The distant explosion still stuck to his eardrums.

LESCOTT climbed the ridge that neared the Arkansas river and went downgrade on the narrow road. He crossed a plank bridge that hurled the beat of hoofs away in drumming echoes. Following the gunshot, not a sound hurt the stillness; stillness of the day. There wasn't even a dog's barking; nothing save the smoke of dust and the smell of the dry burned outdoors.

He saw the motionless tops of the willows on the river's banks and caught the odor of mud and fish and stagnation. The cooler depths of the stream were covered with a purple haze. He watched the back trail with a covert eye, and came to another big wagon bridge which was an ugly bulk in the sun's gild. The acid earth odors stung his nostrils. It was the clean good smell of a clean world, even though it suffered in the sun's untiring blaze. He came again to a bend in the river and turning into a field, rode along its cooler edge. Impressions ran violently through him as he neared a cottonwood clump.

How reminiscent of the past this was, when he'd never ridden far without the fear of danger lying ahead, to spring at him like a cougar from a tree. There was something good in it and there was something terrible in it, and it was there, always there ahead of him, to keep him from forgetting. He traveled onward through the gold of the flaming sun, going closer on the hard-packed trail to the shade of the darkening trees. The line cabin had to be close inside the clump of woods. His horse walked slowly. It was hard to thrust out of mind thoughts of Qauntrill and Wild Bill Anderson. It was even more difficult to feel himself a different person and he knew as he sat aboard his best friend and felt his sturdy body moving under him that he was in a foreign field, without other friends. The time—yes it was the time when a man feels the bigness of the unknown. And it was now time to exercise caution. Dust smoke-screened him.

* * *

THERE WAS no chance to evade the man who was coming at her, with his slitted eyes gleaming malevolently and she let him close in on her. Twice she struck him in the face, seeking to beat him off. But he was strong and brutal and those crashing blows merely deepened his

anger. He had hold of her shoulders now. He shook her and then he slapped her face with his palm and shook her again. He held her out at arm's length and cursed her, his teeth flashing in the snarl that twisted his thin lips back. She fought desperately to loosen his grip on her shoulders, and he shoved her roughly against the fireplace.

Spinning her around he grabbed her by the nape of the neck and bent her head down until her face was dangerously close to the red hot coals. The smoke almost stifled her. He did not stop pushing her toward the fireplace.

"I'll give you something to remember me by," he rasped.

His intent did not escape her, she gave a lunge and pulled away from him, tried to whirl around before he could seize her again, and failed. He had her now and he flung her to the floor. He dropped on his knees beside her, and the whole room shook with the vibration of their rolling, cascading bodies. She tried to kick him and he pulled her to him. She was on her side and strained every muscle to force his face away from hers. She saw the ugly distorted mouth coming closer to her lips, and then she hissed at him and spat in his eyes.

"I'll tame you," he grunted, madder than ever. "I'll tame you and then I'll kill you. I'll collect the reward and I'll get all you've got to give, you rattlesnake—"

She felt herself growing helpless and his mouth coming even closer, and his burning breath was like a branding iron on her flesh. She shut her eyes as her elbows slowly bent and let his mouth find her lips with the fever of drunken passion.

The room grew dark, was a pinwheel, and she opened her eyes, because he relaxed his grip on her for a split second. She wriggled away from him, and in some miraculous fashion achieved her feet. She ran, but he was up and after her and overhauled her just as she reached the open door. She was hurled back into the room. She spun against the fireplace and the breath was knocked out of her lungs. Stell crouched there ready to plunge at him with her flesh searing claws when he stopped, put his hands on his hips, stood spraddle-legged and stared at her.

"Why don't you give in, you fool?" he said slowly. "I don't want to force you to do something against your will. I'm a gentleman. I lost my head. Come on, you pretty cat—"

She reached one hand up to the mantel, thinking of the knife that was hidden there; she knew she would bury it in his heart. She would cut his throat. She would slash him to pieces after he was dead.

She knew she was smiling at him. She had thought of something. She could gain nothing in this primitive struggle; he would be easier to handle if she appeared willing to submit. He would not go too far and kill her, and in submitting she would have a chance to equal the odds against them. She wanted that knife, knowing she could never reach her Colts. He could see her cartridge belt hanging from a peg on the wall; he would make it a point to prevent her from moving in that direction.

She had forgotten about Charley Curtis, locked in the room beyond, with no chance to get out. If she could get to the door and turn the key in the lock—But such thinking was crazy. She was going insane; she was sure of it. Curtis would rescue her from this man but he would turn on her then and the law would demand her life. However, there was a chance, if she could pit one man against the other—

She laughed, and still smiling said, "Let me go into that room a moment.

"Sure, we'll both go in. Guess we'd better be friends. That Captain has been hunting them smuggled guns. He thinks you burned your wagons to make it look like I done it, just so you wouldn't be caught with your wagons heavy with U.S. rifles, dearie." He mopped blood out of his face where she'd scratched him. She could see red welts where her sharp nails had made in his flesh.

She laughed and slowly tore the remnants of her thin shirt away to leave herself bare above the waist except for the brassiere. She threw the shirt in a corner and turned slowly to the door of the Captain's cell. Her smile seemed to have disarmed Mike Fanning, that and her careless abandon in removing her ragged shirt. Captain Curtis would be waiting.

She knew the Captain had heard everything and even though she was suspected of killing his father, he wasn't the type to let a woman be manhandled in his presence. Stell had heard of some decent things the soldier had done. She was glad she hadn't killed him.

Sedately she stepped closer to the door and put her right hand on the knob. "We'll go in there and you'll see what a woman I am, Mike. Maybe we can make a deal to combine our two freight lines. How about it?"

"Now you're talking sense," Fanning said, with a grin. "Together we can go places and have the biggest freight line in the world."

She reached for the knob again and, quickly bending her shoulders, she shoved the door wide. Then she moved aside, crossing the threshold so as not to be caught between the two men.

THE CAPTAIN sat on his bed and smoked and thought of what a fiend Mike Fanning actually had proven himself to be. No longer did he think Stell had burned her own wagons; Fanning was guilty of that. He was shrewd and masterful and he was afraid of her as competition and he had tried to throw suspicion on her because he was the gun thief and smuggler and was in a tight pocket.

It was his business to recover those rifles before they were peddled to hostile savages. He felt sure those guns had not been destroyed in the fire of last night when Stell's dozen big freighters were burned. He'd found traces of kerosene, in his investigation, but he had not found a single gun barrel in the smoking ruins. And steel did not burn.

Having exonerated Stell, he now sat there and listened to the struggle. She was a tough woman. She could give and she could take and she would outwit any man who did not overpower her with brute force, as Fanning had tried doing a minute ago.

He was sure Fanning would kill her. The man was stalling now, but when he got his hands on her again and the rage swelled within him, he would kill her as he would a snake. No doubt the Yellow-Headed Panther did fascinate him in a way. He knew she had fascinated other men, just as big and tough as Fanning had ever dared be. There was something about the owner of the Prairie Queen freight line that made men mad and cost them their good judgement.

The Captain wondered if those guns could possibly be hidden on the Circle C ranch. The big ranch house over the distant hill would make a clever hiding place and the guns could be stored there until the investigation failed and was abandoned, and then the firearms could be delivered to the Indians or whoever had contracted for them.

What had brought the owner of the Red Ball stage line to this lonely line cabin? Had he been tipped off it was Stell's hiding place?

Or was it possible he had been over at the main ranchhouse and had left some of his freight haulers there to guard the contrabrand guns?

As the desperate struggle continued Captain Charley wondered who would be the winner. He knew if Stell could get her hands on a weapon she would finish Mike Fanning for keeps.

There was nothing he could do to help her, although he might have tried if he had been free. Even though Stell was supposed to have killed his father, Captain Charley found it disgusting to think of a man like Fanning trying to prolong a woman's torture. Besides, he had learned that the Yellow-Headed Panthers' riders had saved his life by riding down main street of Liberty and discharging their weapons at his attackers. She had told them she

wanted the Captain protected; it had become obvious to him the reason was to hold him as hostage against the law of Sheriff Tom Decker.

IT WAS Decker who had kept the Indians from Liberty, although the Reservation was less than twenty miles away. To Captain Curtis this had hit an odd note and he'd begun to suspect Decker of being in on the gun robberies and the smuggling. But he had never been able to pin anything on the sheriff and this, of course, had satisfied him hugely.

The feud between the Red Ball and the Prairie Queen freight lines had been on the verge of taking a severe toll several times. The Captain felt definitely that Mike Fanning had pushed it to a conclusion by his high and mighty tactics. But was Fanning and his crew the gun bandits?

The Yellow-Headed Panther had sent her freight haulers—really imported gunmen—across the ranch to the house which would afford her a more comfortable hiding place. It probably would be a long time before the woman in the east who owned it would put in an appearance. Barren of livestock and partially wrecked in a cyclone six months ago the ranch had stayed devoid of occupancy.

The U.S. officer suddenly thought of his task—recovery of the guns—and he wondered if he had come within sight of the mystery's solution. He was playing a single-handed game. There was nobody in town he cared to trust.

Big Mike Fanning, owner of the red-wheeled wagons, had been a freight hauler out of Abilene before starting an organization of his own. He had tried to crowd Stell out of the picture and therein lay the cause of the feud, and he was still determined to ruin her. He had brought about the culmination by burning the Prairie Queen wagons, if he had done it.

Charley was sure he was on the right track—that Mike was his man! He suddenly came back to the present and the fight, knew now that the cunning woman was about to pull a clever stunt to save herself from the peril that so badly stalked her. Charley heard her hand on the door.

10

THE MINUTE Stell Marshall opened the door, she screamed, "Help me, Charley! Help me—!" Her lips came together and her teeth bit sharply against each other. Fanning had secured a fresh hold on her. He threw her back out of the doorway. She crashed against the table, upset a chair. She struck the table hard and a gasp of pain was torn from her throat. The pain shot hot and crazy through her and she went blind.

She tried to whirl around to see what was going on. Smashing fists on flesh and bone reached her. But she did not see the fight; she was groping blindly for a place to sit down. She had never been in more anguish. She wiped at the sweat that stained her bare waist and shone like sequins on her throat. Sweat trailed downward into the hollow between her deep breasts. She almost fainted, bore up and fumbled her way to the mantel. She got the Bowie knife. Her sweaty palm closed on the handle. She spun around. The lamplight glinted off the blade of the weapon. She took two steps. Then she fell, in a dead swoon, face down on the floor.

Mike Fanning grunted when he jumped at Curtis. He grunted again when he threw his right hand hard at Charley's head. His fist slid along the Captain's skull.

Charley canted his head. Fanning's knuckles fanned and lifted his hair. He pulled up his forearms, shoved his shoulder into Big Mike, and drove him farther away with a terrific left hand to the stomach. When Fanning bent down he got a jolting blow on the chin; it raised his head and

slammed him through the doorway. The lighter man hurled all his weight with the punch. His sledging rights found the big-boned face and brought blood from Fanning's nose. He tried to dodge those wicked blows of retaliation, shifting around on his feet, ducking this way and that, weaving in and out, evading murderous haymakers, knowing if one snagged him he'd go down like an axed steer. His hands were covered with his antagonist's blood. It was spurting out of Fanning's nose and other wounds. Curtis' knuckles had ripped the skin away and a ring on his righthand had cut a gash in the big man's upper lip.

The Captain was trapped, could not work his way out from the wall beside the bedroom door. He got in three short licks, driving his fists into Fanning's chest and almost upsetting him. He stepped in and out, his arms becoming heavy-weighted. His knuckles were oily with gore. He felt a sledge-hammer on his forehead and he tumbled back against the wall and almost sagged down. He was blind now; the other man's superior strength was tiring him, had rendered him almost incapable of defending himself. He was hit twice on the jaw and the room pinwheeled and flame burst out of the air in front of him, made a rippling curtain between them. He knew he had Fanning's mouth bloody. He strove to batter it to a pulp and smashed his fists into it again and again, and Fanning kept him there with his back to the boards.

The floor was slick with blood and his feet slid in the red pool. He fell forward and heard Fanning grunt as his fist crashed into the wall. The man's ponderous arm fell against Curtis' left shoulder. He pulled it away, held it, nursed his fist. He tried to work his left hand, but Charley got under the blows and tore into the big man's belly with killing punches that made Fanning give ground.

They circled each other, arms up and bent, pushing quick blows at each other. They were slower now and both were wet with blood. Fanning lunged, he shoved both hands out and made a vice on Charley's throat that shut the latter's wind off. The Captain went backwards, Fanning staying with him. Charley hit the fireplace, smashing Fanning's face with hard rights and lefts without dislodging his hands. Then he stopped breathing. He couldn't get those iron hands off his throat. He struggled for breath. He could not see the light in the door now. He could not even see the sunlight. He knew he was through, that he could not continue and felt himself sagging down. The other man's weight was rendering it impossible to move, only to sag down to the floor. It seemed Fanning was holding him up. He tasted his own blood and he could smell blood. He stopped hitting at his antagonist. His throat was taut, his breath was there and it would not come out. He could not force it out. His brain seemed to burst.

"You damned lawdog," shouted Fanning, through his battered lips. "It's a pleasure—" Those iron hands bit deeper. Charley tried to break the grip. The bigger man laughed. Nothing but murder governed him. It was all over.

Charley did not see the shadow frame the doorway, nor did he see the lighting fast movement of the new arrival. He knew only that he was down, sitting upright with his back to the fireplace. His breath was coming back. He had begun to see daylight in the doorway, and the woman on the floor. She had moved, was crawling, was up and the knife gleamed in her hand. But he saw the shadow between Stell Marshall and Fanning. He saw Fanning hurled away and staggering across the room, overturning the table. He made out a face in the light that came through the door and the windows. He almost yelled out at the top of his lungs.

LESCOTT had reached the cabin just in time to keep Mike Fanning from killing Charley Curtis. He raced into the room, and broke the

giant's grip on the Captain's throat. He whirled him over the floor and grabbed his right hand gun and covered the fabulous Mr. Fanning before the latter could seize the rifle he had stood against the door casing.

"Don't move," Lescott said. "One step, one movement no matter how slight, and I'll send a slug through your heart, Mister Fanning."

Stell Marshall, holding her side, walked over to side Lescott. She placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. "He tried to kill us. He would have killed the officer. His name is Fanning; do you know him?"

Lescott nodded. "Get a rope," he ordered. "Fanning is the Captain's prisoner. Tie him up while I hold this gun on him. The soldier has some unfinished business with the Red Ball owner, if I'm not mistaken."

"He's got nothing on me," Fanning growled. "What's the idea of siding them, Lescott? I can do more for you than they can; I'm your friend."

"Tie him up," Lescott snapped to Stell. "Make it fast, and don't leave any slack in the rope. He's cunning; I think he came out here figuring you were using the cabin as a hideout and besides, perhaps he was looking for the hidden army rifles. He was afraid they would be found."

Charley limped over to lend a hand in trussing up the Red Ball owner.

"Put him in that room," Stell said; "he can't get out of there."

The Captain forced a wry grin. "I'll say he can't," he exclaimed. He gave the giant a hard shove. Fanning went lurching across the floor toward the small bedroom. The rope was slack around his ankles but secure. He would have a hard time getting out of the truss. Stell banged the door shut. She turned to face Charley and Lescott. She threw the knife across the room and it buried itself in the wall. Lescott smiled coldly.

"Charley wants to arrest me, too," said Stell Marshall. "He has it in for me because he thinks I killed his father deliberately. I didn't. I—I'm sorry he got in the way."

Lescott moved close to the Yellow-Headed Panther. He had found room to admire this haunted and driven woman. There was something about her that commanded his respect. She was Black Bart's daughter; she had inherited her father's remarkable courage and astuteness of mind. She was on the way now to following in Black Bart's footsteps. He realized there was no way to save her. She would be hanged if she returned to Liberty.

But perhaps they could get her safely out of the country.

The Captain stepped forward, mopped blood from a cut in his face. "I guess you got me figured wrong, Stell," he said slowly; "I want Fanning. My duty is to find those missing rifles and jail the gun smugglers. I am not interested in your troubles with the town of Liberty and the Red Ball freight outfit. It wouldn't matter to me if you killed Mike Fanning and all his henchmen; I am quite sure it would save a big job of hanging them. Eventually, they'll all get the rope put around their greasy necks. But you've got me wrong, Stell. Unless you're involved in the gun running and thefts from the army posts, and in illegal transactions with the Indians, you're in the clear with me."

She believed him because the whole truth was plainly written in the Captain's strong blond face. His thin mouth was a motionless line of stone and his eyes had enough steel in them to give his words emphasis. She concluded he could be trusted, that he wasn't holding his father's death against her. In this realization she found great relief. Why, she might've killed Charley Curtis, thinking he was stalking her and represented her gravest peril.

A COOL man but a badly beaten one, the soldier picked up his short blue jacket and walked out into the yard where he stood under a cottonwood, gazing around him. Lescott watched him.

The soldier was a threat to him. If he found out he was a fugitive from Quantrill's old band of raiders on the border, Charley Curtis would immediately turn bitter against him. There was a reason why the man was friendly; he had saved him and he could not help but show his appreciation and he had honest merits. Lescott shrugged. The man was cold stone now, his face carved in stern lines—it was a strong soldier's face. It had been moulded in cannon fire and the flames from smaller guns and the slashing brightness of saber steel.

But Lescott knew Captain Charley was a benovelent person. He believed in an eye for an eye—he figured he owed both of his eyes to Lescott. He was unreasonably sure if Lescott hadn't saved him he would now be cold in death.

The flaming frontier was no place for a man without courage. It had become a battleground; a constant struggle prevailed between the lawless and the lawful. Captain Charley Curtis had done his part toward making the west habitable for honest folk. In the war between the North and the South, Charley, a Yankee captain, had been wounded and sent west on a special assignment. The war had been a swift, colorful experience. The minnie ball in his left shoulder had left a little stiffness there, but not enough to impede his agitily.

Charley now wondered if Lescott, the strange bronze rider from out of nowhere, had served as a soldier. If so he surely must have been in the cavalry, since he was a good horseman. He rode like a soldier; he had that military erectness about him. No doubt he had served with the Confederates. He wore a rebel's hatband.

Charley knew Lescott had pride, that pride was his strength. This distinguished him from the run of men. He was tough, hardened, and it would be hard to sway him from his decisions. His pride and his stubborness went together. Although he was brave to the point of carelessness, he had a certain confidence in himself which seemed never to desert him. But there was another thing Charley had observed; Bruce Lescott was being driven, something was lashing him, frustrating him.

Captain Curtis was sure if Lescott made a promise he would keep it. He had noticed other features in the man's makeup which he admired. Lescott was ready to defend the underdog without asking whether the underdog was right or wrong. He hated to see the odds pile up against anyone he liked. Once his sympathies were given liberally he would not retract them. For instance there was Raymond, the unfortunate boy of the Liberty town stable. The kid had told Charley about Lescott's generosity and how, as soon as morning came and the stores were open, he was going to spend the gold eagle Lescott had given him for overalls and boots and shirts, so he could be clean and retain Lescott's respect and friendship.

Lescott had seen the boy's pitiable plight and he'd been touched. A man who was only hard would not have cared whether the boy lived or died, let alone extending a hand to him. Lescott had become the idol of this kid, too.

"I can't get it," Charley muttered over and over again, "I can't get it. The stranger is one of the most interesting men I've ever met. I owe him my life; he has come to my rescue more than once, and right now the reason I am enjoying the fresh air is because of his influence over Stell Marshall. I don't feel like letting him down. I promised him I'd make no break for freedom and he extracted a promise from the Blonde Panther that she would not put me to death." Grim, silent and with deep lines in his face, the bearded, dusty stranger was a valiant person, to say the least.

Charley walked about the yard. He heard the splash and sputter of the Arkansas river. He walked around to the leanto and inspected the horses. His horse was there and so was Lescott's dun. He had never seen the

horse before but from the dun's condition he knew the mount had been hard ridden not long ago. The boiling stream was close by and a path led to the bank.

HE STOMPED in under the roof and closely examined the saddle gear on the frisky dun who sidled away from him as if understanding he was sticking his nose into his master's business. *The man on the dun horse!* Something flashed into Charley's mind. Where had he heard that? What did it mean? He fought vainly for recollection and found nothing on the saddle gear to give him the clew he needed. He was tempted to look into the saddle pockets. He moved closer to the dun and bent his head to inspect the saddle bags more sharply. He had his head canted when he heard a cavalcade of mounted horsemen riding hard toward the cabin. The cloudy dust ballooning towards the sky from the trail a hundred yards distant signified a large number of riders. He saw them turn in at the gate and one get off to replace the pole. Then he whipped around and started back to the cabin. He walked around the corner. The men were less than fifty yards away and riding slowly through the shade of the cove. Their firearms clattered and they were in close formation.

Charley quickly approached the open door and strode into the steamy heat of the big room. Lescott whirled from the fireplace; his hand dropped to his gun. He turned squarely around so he was facing the sunlight.

Stell was on her knees before the fire. She stirred meal in a frying pan. She wore a calico apron over her riding pants. Her saffron hair gleamed in the roseate shadows. She was pale but lovely and quite determined-looking. Her eyes softened when they scanned Charley's swollen face.

Lescott stepped quickly to the door. The sun streaming in, shone on his bronze face. Charley was compelled to attention by the strength in the bronze mask. The group of riders were rushing down upon the cabin now. The stacatto stamp of hoofs on the baked ground reached the room.

"Who are those men?" Lescott snapped, staring quickly at Stell.

She smiled, went back to the fire and started stirring the mush. Sedately she replied, "They are what's left of my riders. I sent them to the big house on the Circle C. I guess the rest of them are coming along. Let's hope so."

The bronze man moved back slowly to the fireplace and stood, with his right shoulder touching the mantle. His face was inscrutable and his eyes were like ball bearings of steel.

11

OUR MEN dismounted and stamped into the room. Their spurs rattled on the floor. They immediately went into conference with the Blonde Panther. Charley was glad that looks couldn't kill or he would be dead; they hated him, those dusty riders.

He got to thinking about Mike Fanning while waiting for the conference to end. Charley did not know what to do with the boss of the Red Ball. He could not expect any help from Sheriff Decker; Pete had given him the low-down on his future father-in-law, or at least he thought of Decker as that. The minion of the law could not be trusted if Mike Fanning's position was in jeopardy. The soldier had become sure of Fanning's complicity in the gun robberies.

The United States officer decided he would have to use his wits in this strange situation and that nothing could be gained by force. Fanning must not be allowed to slip through his hands. "I have gone too far and the risks have been too great to find the guns. I can't let him get away now."

Lescott stood with his shoulders slanted against a cottonwood, smoking. He was the most perfectly composed man Charley had ever seen. Lescott did not look at him. His head was canted and he was thinking, but there was that alertness about him which seemed never to desert the man. Charley walked a little piece through the shade, reached a barren spot where the sun's blaze bore down with cruel intensity. A strange thought entered the army investigator's mind, but he was quick to banish it. How did he know this unusual man was to be trusted? How did he know Lescott wasn't in with the gun runners?

But he owed Lescott more than a debt of gratitude and the unfairness of suspecting him of foul play or depredations against the government washed Charley's mind clean of any furtive thoughts against the stranger. What did occupy his mind was the realization that he must perforce find the boss of the gun robbers and the solution of the Omaha Post deal. He slowly turned around and started moving toward the morose man against the tree.

Stell Marshall appeared suddenly in the doorway; she called to Lescott. The Yellow-Headed Panther stood there with her hair disheveled, and her waist was bare save for the blue calico brassiere she wore. She motioned for Charley, and he started walking toward her, slightly behind Lescott. It was obvious that something had gone wrong. Stell's eyes betrayed her anxiety, and there was a harder look on her face than Charley Curtis had observed there before, even after her fight with Mike Fanning.

"You both come in," she said. "We're in danger; there's no time to lose. I am going to rely upon you men to help me. Charley, you're included. Come on in and I'll explain what has happened to make me mad as hell."

The big room was hot and still and, for a moment there was no sound save that made by the birds and the wild creatures of the woods. The Yellow-Headed Panther appeared to be thinking deeply. She was trying to clothe her thoughts in words that would be clear and brief. When she lifted her head her eyes scanned the six men before her. She turned and shot a glance at Mike Fanning's door.

"I have these four men left," she said slowly and softly. "The others are dead, drygulched by the Red Ball renegades. I know the Captain will be interested to know I have decided to make a deal with him. Bruce Lescott has sided him and so I am going to do this—Mike Fanning's secret headquarters can be found at the Circle C ranch house three miles from here. To this place the Red Ball wagons have trekked a long time with contrabrand guns and other pieces of military equipment for sale to the Indians. This rendezvous is well protected. I sent my crew over there, thinking I'd move to larger, more comfortable quarters. They ran into merciless gunfire; these four escaped."

She paused and sweat gleamed on her face. She looked down at the Colt near her right hand. Her shapely fingers were spread apart on the table. She peered up at the blond freight-hauler with the strapped-down guns. "Howard, roll me a cigarette; I guess I'm getting a little shaky."

Howard swiftly tapered up a cigarette and handed it to her, putting a lighted Lucifer to the end of it as she held the smoke in her mouth. He then silently stepped back into the small group of freight-haulers.

Stell Marshall continued, her voice gently modulated. "At any minute the Red Ball will pick up our trail and we'll be surrounded. Besides, we'll be so greatly outnumbered we won't stand a chance. Fanning can be used to hold them off, if we work it right. I am sure the stolen guns the Captain is after are stored away at the Red Ball's hiding place."

The Captain's chin rested on the palm of his left hand. His arms were

folded. There was sweat on his face, too.

CAPTAIN Charley spoke carefully, "What's the deal, Stell? Where do I fit in the picture?" He wanted to know what she had against him. He had nothing against her. Her affair was a state case; it wasn't a Federal offense to kill anyone, not unless it was on government property or involved a government offjcial. He had decided the killing of his father by this girl had not been deliberate. He did not know of anything Uncle Sam wanted the freight line operator for, anything that she had done against the army. True, she had been a suspect in the gun robberies. The Prairie Queen freight wagons had been closely watched, as had the drivers in Stell's employ. But nothing definite had come of these investigations.

"You don't come in now, I reckon," she admitted, dropping her head. She stared at the ground a minute. There was a brave smile on her face when she looked up. "I keep forgetting you represent the army and want those stolen guns back. I am sorry about your father. We were fighting in the street. I thought I saw something shiny in his hand. I couldn't see his face. He was in the way and I—I fired. I'm sorry, Captain."

It was a grevious moment for the Captain. He nodded, his eyes troubled. "I'll put nothing in your way," he finally said. "You keep Mike Fanning until you're ready to release him. Don't turn him back to his cutthroats. As long as you've got the Red Ball owner his haulers will leave you alone. You can communicate with me when you're ready. You must promise not to kill him."

She glanced at her four wagon drivers who had turned gunmen, studied their faces, looked then back at Charley. "We don't want the guns; if we find them you'll get them back. I respect the Federal laws. I don't have any reason to do you harm. Now let's get the hell out of here. We've got to stay together until we're all on safe ground. His muleskinners will murder you the same as they will us if they capture us, Captain."

Charley made up his mind he would use Mike Fanning before he was through. He would have to talk.

He decided he wouldn't leave Fanning until he'd found a way to make the Red Ball's owner come clean with the true story of why he had burned Stell's Prairie Queen wagons. They put the trussed up prisoner behind a log and covered him with brush. Fanning swore and fumed. He would see them all dead. What right did Charley and Lescott have to protect a fugitive from justice—a gun smuggler? "The Red Ball men will leave every damned one of you dead for the buzzards," he sneered.

Lescott walked over to him, waved his hand. "Shove something in his mouth; he talks too much. If he tries to give us away to his renegade drivers, we'll put a slug through his yellow heart."

John Howard handled the captive with rough hands. The only thing he didn't cover up about Mike Fanning was the latter's face. He left it exposed to the scalding sun that shone through sparse branches of a tree. "Reckon a good sweat will do him good," Howard said.

He looked at Lescott and frowned. The latter wondered why the man so bitterly resented his presence. They'd never be friends. He found Stell gazing at him and her expression told him she was looking to him for a great deal. He did not understand himself. Why was he going to this trouble to help the soldier? By simply slitting the Captain's throat and leaving Mike Fanning alive, they would get away with their scalps; the Red Ball outfit wound not follow them. But Fanning meant a lot to the army man and Lescott dispelled his former mode of thinking. He was going to see it through.

It simply meant, when boiled down to the naked essentials, a battle between the two freight lines, a resumption of the battle of Liberty.

Stell was always close to him in the impending moments. They watered their horses and separated,

each finding his own vantage point and digging in. The Yellow-Headed Panther stayed with Lescott. They lay in the shade of the willows on the bank of the rustling river and listened. They were tense and waited and watched and were ready. Tex had been chosen to stand guard; he climbed to a somewhat higher elevation where he could see the surrounding countryside. He was equipped with a pair of field glasses.

SEATED beside Lescott on a log near the water's edge, Stell said softly, "I don't know why you're staying with us, Lescott. You know we have but a small chance of getting out of the trap. Nor do I know why you are so faithful to Charley. I have been wondering about that ever since I heard about how you sided him against Fanning's men in Liberty."

He did not say anything. He was looking away from her, and his eyes were on the boiling river. When he spoke his voice was low although his words were quite clear. "Sometimes we do things we don't understand, ourselves, and I guess it's that way where the Captain is concerned. So we won't waste any time talking about it. What I have in mind right now is how we can hold Fanning as hostage and use him to drive a hard bargain with the Red Ball outfit. They want him back; they'll try anything to get him back."

She smiled and placed a gentle hand on his shirt sleeve. He felt the allure of her as she pinched the cloth and pulled his arm toward her. She was prettier than any woman he had ever known, even in her rough garb. She had three pistols stuck in the band of her overalls and a Colt reposed in a holster on her thigh. In the sheath on the wide belt was the Bowie knife he had seen her have in the cabin. She looked sweet and vicious and capable.

She was slim and her legs were straight; only the gauze shirt and mud splotched overalls hid her graceful body. Her boots were scarred and needed polishing, and her hair tumbled around her shoulders in a cascade of yellow splendor. But it was the charm of her face that held him. Her eyes were lovely and her skin, flawless, stood out in the same beautiful prominence as her hair. There was a smudge of gumbo on her left cheek. They were high cheeks and her nose was straight and small. The black spot did not detract from her tempting loveliness. There was a scratched place near one corner of her vivid mouth. It was a small mouth, capable of a burning passion and revealing a lusty temperament. Had it not been set in a face as strong as a bronze mask, Lescott would have thought of it as the mouth of a spoiled child.

He found himself wondering about her childhood. What had she been like as a girl before her mind had been twisted out of shape by the jolts her sensational experiences had given her. Why hadn't she married and settled down with one man and lived a normal life, with children and a home and the placidity of sane existence? But those were questions he'd never be able to answer unless she came out and told him what he wanted to know. Her fame had spread along the border; she was the most notorious woman the west had produced. She had driven her own heavy freight wagons—

She rolled over on the ground and tapped him on the toe of his boot. "You are risking your life just to be with us, aren't you, Bruce?"

He frowned, reached for tobacco and papers and then let his hand fall away. They would see the tiniest puff of smoke if they were watching. He lifted his wide shoulders and his thin mouth grew wire taut. "I am not doing it for any reason save to entertain myself. I think you've got me wrong, Stell; I'm not the big, soft-hearted chump you've pictured me. If you knew my past you wouldn't have that angel look on your face right now."

Her white teeth gleamed when she pulled her lips back and let her eyes meet his. She drew herself up onto the log beside him, and her body was pressed close to his, when she murmured: "Yes, I think I can guess.

You have made yourself what you are. You were not born that way. All your brutal instincts have been acquired, have been developed by environment. You might have been as different as I might have been. I reckon we just got off the boat at the wrong place, don't you?"

THE DAY was still water-clean light. The man on the hillside could see for a long way and he suddenly lifted his right hand, shielded his eyes with his left, then dropped both hands and came running down the embankment.

"A group of riders are headed this way," Tex announced, his voice sedate but strong. "We'd better get ready. I don't like this setup, I can tell you. Why don't we ride off and leave them now? If we stay, we'll all be killed. We know where they're at and we can ditch them while there's time left. We'll ride west. They're coming from the east."

"Maybe you'll tell us where we can go," snapped John Howard. It was obvious there was ill feeling between the two gunfighters.

Tex turned to Stell Marshall. "The horses are saddled; we can ride to Dodge. I'd rather take my chances—"

"And run into some sheriff's posse. Didn't Lescott tell us Tom Decker and a gang had gone to the mill to find us, thinking we'd abducted Charley Curtis?" Stell shrugged. "The mill's situated down at Arkansas river. For all we know they're heading this way, too. We'd better stay put and not risk getting between two fires."

Tex was displeased. He stomped over to the horses. Lescott followed him and looked at the Dun. Missouri sidled against him, thrust his nose against his master's cheek. Lescott placed his arm around the horse's neck and pressed his face against his head.

"You sure like your horse, don't you?" Stell had followed him. She removed the Colt from the holster on her wide cartridge belt and inspected it. "What's the dun's name, Bruce?" The belt was brand new.

"I call him Missouri," Lescott said. "He's a good pal. I hope nothing happens to him." The guerilla frowned and walked away. He knew the time had come when to think of a woman was dangerous, and he avoided her while he made ready to meet the army rifle bandits with a proposition he hoped would turn them back. He mounted his horse and waving his hand at Stell, shouted back to her: "If they fire on me and I don't make it, you fight them as long as you can fire a gun. I don't know what I'll accomplish by going to tell them we've got Mike Fanning and if they want him back alive they'd better go back to Liberty. If they start a fight we'll kill Fanning."

She showed her admiration for Lescott by running toward him and kissing his hand—the hand that held the bridle reins. He stared down at her with a hard look on his bronze face. Other women had done that, and some of them had begged him to spare their husbands. But he had gone ahead and killed those men because to him it had meant only one thing, total destruction to carry out Quantrill's orders. He had distinguished himself as a good soldier, if Quantrill's raiders could be called that.

Under the black flag! His bronze face was a motionless mask.

"Watch out," Stell cried. "If you don't return I'll never forgive myself for letting you go."

He urged Missouri into a fast lope and soon was out of the woman's sight. What claim did she have on him? He had no claim on her. They were simply a pair of underdogs who had received a rotten deal from destiny. The girl he loved was in Liberty, safe he hoped, and he wished to make short work of this situation so as to get back to her. He had found the one woman whose power to charm him was unbreakable: he would never be at ease away from her.

Lescott saw the band of hooded men riding hard in his direction. The dust was like gunpowder and burned his eyes, caked on his sweaty face.

He pulled up and sat his saddle, without drawing either his saddle carbine or reaching for his Colts. He saw one of the hooded riders drag out his carbine from the boot and swing it into a ready position. They came on, four abreast, close packed, reining in only when they were within twenty feet of him. They wore long white hoods.

"I'm from Mike Fanning," Lescott said, keeping his voice low and even and cool. "He has sent you a message by me. You are to turn back, he says, because he is a prisoner of Stell Marshall and she is prepared to give you a fight if you go any closer to her. Fanning's only chance to escape with his life is in your hands."

ONE OF the mounted men urged his Morgan a few steps closer. "How we know you're tellin' th' truth? He may already be dead. Knowin' Stell Marshall th' way I do, I'd say he's dead now and you're tryin' to pull th' wool over our eyes."

"Did he send us a note?" shouted another rider, far back in the rear. "If he didn't—"

"No, he didn't send any note." Lescott stayed cool although he saw his effort falling to staves. "The only thing I can tell you is if you go any closer you'll find out. But it will be too damned late."

After a moment's decision the white-hooded leader said sternly, "We'll have to have more proof. We got a dozen more riders across th' river and they're goin' to hem you in. We know where you're holed up and it ain't goin' to be good. You got seven against our thirty-two hell-for-leather riders. You might go back and tell Stell Marshall we won't leave a damned one of you alive if any harm has come to Mike. If you go back there, trot Mike out and let him speak for himself; then we might consider makin' a deal with Stell."

Lescott whirled his horse. He didn't expect a shot in the back now, but he knew he'd be closely followed and he didn't want to be in the way when Stell and her companions opened fire. It was to be a battle to the last ditch and no quarter would be shown. However, instead of keeping on his tail, the white-hoods stayed where they were, waiting and Lescott heard the leader shout: "Have Mike come out and speak for himself. It's th' only way we'll be convinced you got him."

Lescott urged Missouri into a light run, slipped through the trees and pulled up at the edge of the embankment. He let Missouri pick his own way cautiously down the steep hillside toward the roaring river. Stell Marshall came out to meet him. He saw Charley Curtis, cold and unmoved, certainly unafraid, standing near the trussed up figure of Mike Fanning.

He didn't believe there were a dozen men coming down along the other side of the Arkansas. That had been a clever ruse to fool him into making a bad move. They had the twenty hoods right there in their group; there were no more. If there had been another group riding toward them on the opposite side of the river they would be showing up and Tex had given no indication from the elevation that he had seen any danger signs save that one Lescott had just met.

12

STELL Marshall's blue-green eyes scanned his face. She saw it was stoic; there was nothing to see. The lines moved past his mouth when he spoke. She had never seen him so grave, nor his voice so steellike. She heard his explanation of what had happened in the cattle lane.

She stood beside him, one hand resting on his knee. Missouri stood motionless like a general's charger. The woman's soft palm moved over his leg and he reached down and clasped it. This was his first indication of a responsive emotion.

"What do you think we should do?" she asked.

"Trot Mike Fanning out there. He doesn't have to speak a word. I'll take him with me and when they see him they'll go back. I can think of nothing else to do to stave off what will be a terrible fight and possibly complete annihilation for all of us."

She nodded.

Lescott motioned for the Captain. Charley approached, stopped beside the dun and rolled a cigarette. But he quickly tore it to pieces and the brown grains were carried away on the wind.

"Good work, Lescott," the Captain said. "I'll go over and see what Mike has to say. If he finds out we aim to kill him if he doesn't obey us, he'll kick in. Maybe he thinks we'll spare him to find out where he buried the hidden guns. I figger it'll take some tall talking."

Stell joined him near where Big Mike lay on an Indian blanket with the brush piled up over him and his face exposed to the cruel sun. He listened while Stell and Charley explained the situation. He waved his manacled hands, lifting them through the brush. He lolled his head in a stubborn refusal to meet their demands. When they drew away from him, Lescott's hopes fell. Quickly he rode the dun up to where the captive lay with the sun drawing the sweat out on his blistered face.

"You get back away from him," Lescott ordered brusquely. "I've been wanting to do this a long time. I'll let the horse stomp him in the earth. Get out of Missouri's way; let's don't fool with him another minute."

Mike raised his hands again and cowered, scattered the brush and tried to roll over. But he couldn't make it because his legs were bound securely and he remained prostrate, absolutely helpless. He suddenly nodded his head, kept on nodding it. He waved his hands time and again. But Lescott rode the horse closer to him and Charley and Stell fell back out of the dun's path.

The Captain heard Missouri's hoofs ringing on small rocks and crackling brush was scattered; he saw the smooth horse stamping closer and closer to the cowering giant, and Lescott stopped the dun when he'd straddled the Red Ball owner's body. Missouri stood there, motionless. His left front hoof rested lightly on Mike Fanning's deep-moving chest.

When the Captain saw Fanning's face again white fear had stamped defeat into his face so plainly he was allowed to rise up off the blanket, with his leg shackles removed and walk ahead of Lescott through the alternating patches of sunlight and shadow. His hands were still securely bound. He was without a hat and his red hair lay down on his forehead and his dirty white shirt showed the streaking of sweat. His breathing was so disturbed he could be heard panting by the man on the dun.

Lescott was well covered by the guns of those crouching behind the embankment. It was a crucial situation and nerves were taut as fiddle strings. The prisoner was pale and his cruel mouth was twisted out of shape. He raised his hand, walking ahead of Lescott, the moment they came within sight of the white hooded men still waiting where Lescott had left them awhile ago.

Mike Fanning was halted then, and the mounted man behind him, said shielding his voice with his left hand, loud enough for all of them to hear. "Mike wants to tell you something. Better not attempt anything because there's a gun trained on his back and the marksman never misses." He looked down at Fanning and touched his shoulder with the loaded end of his whip. "Speak your piece, Mike," he said in a low tone, "and you'd better make it good. It's the last chance you'll have to save your bacon. Stell Marshall gives no seconds."

BIG MIKE moved his powerful shoulders. He stood in dead grass knee-deep and the sun sucked the sweat out of his massive body. Sweat rivered down his broad cheek

bones; it gleamed like diamonds on his hands and clung to the hairs on the backs of them. He heaved his enormous chest, raised his head.

"Go on back to town," he said. "They've got me and they'll kill me. Don't try anything; I know when I'm whipped. You just go on back and forget all about what's happened. Scatter out and protect yourselves; the U.S. officer's in that group crouching back there ready to kill and torture to win their hand. Tell Gunther I'll be back to play faro. Go and tell Fay Jerard I'm all right. If she doesn't see me again, and I'm left for the buzzards, she knows what to do."

The Red Ball men stood in a semi circle listening to their leader. Silence lay long and deep under the trees. The stink of dust and withered grass held to the air. The man in charge of the group rubbed a hand over his head and adjusted the gun belt around his waist. He then saluted Mike Fanning. Turning his mount, he shouted orders to his men and they moved back slowly toward the road. They stayed slightly behind the one in the lead. Their horses were allowed to walk. Soon they were kicking up the stiff dry dust. The sun winked off their carbines. The saddle-trappings reflected the sun, too. There was no doubt in Lescott's mind; a victory had been won. One idea was worth more than all the guns. Power lay not in armed and blazing wrath but in the human mind.

"I guess it's all over now," Captain Charley told Stell. "You don't need me any more. I've got business to do and I want to talk to Mike as soon as Lescott fetches him back. I'll take him over there in the willows, and have Lescott help me. I think I can make him tell us where he put the guns he took from the Omaha post and why he burned you out. You need have no further worries regarding how I stand where you're concerned. I'm a soldier, not a peace officer."

She waved a ringed hand, gave him a condescending smile. It was obvious to the Captain that she had agreed with his plans. A few qualms bothered him. These were vague, however, and dealt with the fact that the Yellow-Headed Panther was wanted by the law for murder. But what first came before him was his duty as a soldier. He had to find those guns and he had to use his head; he found himself admiring the blonde freight-line operator.

Lescott was in sympathy with his problem. Mike Fanning was walked out of sight and hearing of the camp. Lescott told the Red Ball boss, "I don't like you very well. My horse doesn't care for you either. He will stomp your guts in the ground if you don't tell where you hid them guns you got from the Omaha post."

Charley nodded briskly and said, "He's the one—he's the gun bandit and the smuggler, Bruce. I can see it moving in his face and trying to hide in his damned eyes." He walked around the prostrate prisoner. He looked at Lescott's dun and then back at the captive. "I've seen men killed under the hoofs of horses. This one is trained, the smartest I've ever seen. It's a rough way to die. But you have your choice, Fanning; you'd better make up your mind. Ever since you opened your freight line against Stell, you've fought her with dirty, unhanded tactics. You burned her wagons. You tried to put the guilt for your gun smuggling on her. You've armed the Indians so they can be a severe threat to the people coming west. I think, fella, you'd better start talking."

Mike Fanning gave a hard, deep sigh and his chest heaved. "I know when I'm whipped, but I could see you in hell for it. The army rifles are concealed in the walls of the half ruined ranchhouse. I was after them when I happened to think maybe Stell was hanging out in the line cabin; I figured right. You'll find all the guns there. But you won't be able to save Stell Marshall and her Prairie Queen freight line. She's a killer now; she's got to pay the price the same as I'll have to pay for stealing federal property. Only I won't have to die—"

Stell laughed in his face. She got on her horse and led the others across the fields to the ruins of the Circle C residence and there, hidden behind

the walls were a thousand rifles and four thousand rounds of ammunition. It represented one of the biggest hauls ever taken from Uncle Sam's arsenal at Omaha, although there had been some minor thefts.

CAPTAIN CHARLEY was enthused. In the yard stood a Red Ball freight wagon, empty, and evidently it had been brought out here to haul some of the loot away after dark. Mike Fanning had a lot of other things to tell them. He confessed he'd bought his way into a drunken white scout's confidence and had used the scout to help steal the rifles and the bullets. The guns had been taken by his men, masquerading as soldiers, carried out to the wagons which had been disguised as army transports and they had gotten away with no molestation, due to the absence of the officers and other personnel, who were attending a dance in town.

Captain Charley had nothing but praise for Lescott's ingenious way of forcing the confession out of the sadistic Red Ball freight line operator. He was sorry there was nothing he could do for Stell. He did not believe, now that he had become better acquainted with her, that she'd had any intention of killing his father and felt that the bullet had been accidentally discharged at him. He did not tell Stell how he felt; he did not think it would do any good. But if she were captured by the sheriff he would do his best to help her.

If she hadn't killed those innocent bystanders then she would be free now to return to Liberty and resume her freight line business where she had left off. But no matter what they could prove in her behalf there had been eye witnesses to the deaths of those spectators and the Yellow-Headed Panther would have to stand trial and in the end be convicted. They would blame her for not taking her troubles to the law and settling the feud in a legitimate manner.

Captain Charley walked away and got aboard his horse. He waited, rolling a cigarette and stroking the neck of his piebald, a fleet little horse that had been with him a long time.

Stell rode away with Lescott and they were so close together their legs rubbed. They talked in an undertone and the Captain could not hear what they were saying, and of course to listen was the least of his desires.

"I guess you know the sooner I leave here the safer I'll be," Stell said. "I had the sun in my eyes when I thought something might come of our—well, you surely know why I had you brought to me. It was to renew our—" She hesitated, forced a smile. "I wanted to renew our acquaintance.

She drew away and turned definitely from him. When she spoke there was a thousand miles between them. "S'long, Bruce!"

He stomped off and left her and mounted his horse. The world was pulling its dark coverlet over it and fireflies stabbed the gloom with little arrows of warmth and gold. Lescott watched the sparkling lanterns a minute and, reaching out, caught a firefly in his hand. He opened his fist slowly and let it go. He did not speak to Curtis who swung in beside him. They had hidden the army rifles and cached loot; they were sure there would be no danger of discovery by the Red Ball riders. But Stell Marshall did not know the new place of concealment. Nor did she ask.

Lescott remembered, in the trail's absolute stillness, the tumult he had seen in the Panther's eyes and the feeling of sympathy she had aroused inside him and he could picture now the way her lips had moved with hot, moist appeal. It seemed a million years back to her side, and he knew they would never be together again on this earth. It was like kissing a corpse goodbye—a very dear corpse. You could bring back experiences of that kind, but you couldn't bring back those who had made the experiences.

He suddenly knew what had befallen him. If he had met Stell before he had fallen in love with Fay Jerrard he would have been moved to such an emotional depth he would have responded to her.

It wasn't long until a shimmer of moonlight lay on the plains and the

aroma of the hayfields that still held the day's heat was soothing, and somehow reminiscent of a woman's boudoir. The two men rode on, not speaking; nor was there any sound save the hoofs of their horses on the road. Twice Lescott stared back into the darkening night. He was leaving something very precious to him, and each time he brought his head back around with an effort.

And Stell knew this was the end of it. She turned her head and patted her yellow hair down to her head.

"Good luck, Bruce," she murmured. "Good luck and—God bless you!" But Lescott did not hear her voice.

CHARLEY CURTIS walked into the *Paradise,* looked the crowd over carefully and found the face he was seeking. He then strode directly toward Fay Jerrard. He was alert, steeled against any surprise attack. The Captain knew the Red Ball men had returned to Liberty; they might be in this very room. This time, if it came to a showdown, he would not be sided by anyone. Lescott had gone straight to the hotel.

He remembered he had seen this girl at the *Pacific House* in Saint Joe and that her record was far from good. Fay Jerrard saw him approaching. She nonchalantly lighted a cigarette and exhaled smoke so it curled lazily away from her. The piano player, bald and fleshy, rippled the keys of the music box. The bar was lined with patrons because the cool of the evening had brought out a large run of business.

Curtis stopped at the girl's table, nodded coldly. He saw her crooked smile and read the apprehension she had tried to conceal. But it stood out in her gaze. "Fay Jerrard," he said. "I have not seen you since you sang at the *Pacific House* in Joetown. How are you?"

Her expression slowly changed. Fear was more prominent in her face. She wore a red dress and it was crinkled where sweat stained the armpits; otherwise she was fresh looking. "If it's about Big Mike," she said languidly, "you'll save time by running along, Captain. I don't talk about Big Mike."

"Just a few routine questions," he said in an off-hand manner.

"No questions," she snapped. "I don't care anything about Big Mike. I'm not stalling; I simply am not interested. Captain, I like you. I have always found you interesting—or you were back in Saint Joe. But I can't say the same for Big Mike Fanning. He'd be dull no matter when you found him. I don't know a bigger stupe than Mike. To some he is the Big Cheese; to me he is a pain in the neck. Please—now run along, Captain."

He said sharply, "I think we'll get along better if you don't lie to me."

She traced rings on the round table with her glass. The piano player had started tinkling the keys and he suddenly launched a slow, dreamy waltz. He was an expert and the crowd loved his music. Several of the weary riders at the bar clapped their hands to give him a send off. He nodded and went on playing, while Charley stared straight at Fay Jerrard and wondered if the woman wasn't about the most deceitful creature he had ever met. Of course, she was stalling; the Red Ball men had reported to her because she was Fanning's girl.

"Very well," she said. "What do you want to tell me about Mike?" She seemed willing enough now to admit she'd been playing chess with him. Her smile was quite disarming.

"I want to know who's with him on this owlhoot deal. I want to know who is the second in command of those renegades. If you don't tell me, I'll have to put you in jail as a suspect. I wish to give you every break—" Then harshly, "I want you to talk about the Red Ball, pronto."

She looked at him closely a moment and her mouth got taut and mean. "Do you know a man named Lescott?" she asked calmly. "Bruce Lescott? They say he's the toughest hombre ever to hit Liberty, Kansas. He's a killer and faster than any man walking these streets with a gun. If Bruce Lescott knew what you've just said to me he would come

after you, Charley; in fact you'd have to fight him and he would win because he's your superior in a speedy draw."

He was startled. In fact he was shocked and unable to find his voice. Lescott had never even mentioned this woman to him. He had not known, but since he had become aware of the truth he did not see where he was abusing Lescott's friendship. This woman was no good; she had fooled Lescott, was making a sucker out of him. He—

But he was gripped by an uneasy feeling. However, he did not veer off from his original purpose. "Yes, I know Lescott. I'm afraid he doesn't know you. I might warn you you're playing with dynamite when you're toying with his affections. You say he's a killer. All right; that goes both ways. You might be fooling him now but he'll wake up. I'd hate to be in your shoes when he does. He's already doubting you because of the message Mike Fanning sent you by his owlhoots. When he starts checking you you'd better be covered up."

She gave a start and gleams of fear began to work their way out of both her eyes. But she tossed her head arrogantly and snapped at Charley, "No man would destroy me, not as long as I give myself to him. You are smart, but you underestimate a woman's power; I've never found a man yet I couldn't rule if I wanted him."

Charley thought, *Yes, I believe she is telling the truth. She could rule most any man. However, she couldn't rule me. I see through her. She's a volcano of human feelings, but she can't act a lie too long where a smart man's concerned. She'll overplay her hand.*

Aloud, sitting down at her table he said, "You are going to answer my question, Scheherazade? It's only a few steps to the calaboose and Tom Decker will lock you up and throw the key out the window. Tom—"

She sneered and he thought how ugly her mouth had become when only a fleeting second ago it had been brightly adorable. "Why don't you ask Tom? He's well informed on what's going on here? I can't think of a single person who knows as much about Mike Fanning's business as Sheriff Decker."

He caught the insinuation, the double-talk, and he snapped to attention. He got up, bent over closer to her so he smelled the perfume of her hair. The red satin of her gown was crumpled and added attractiveness to the well made up face. Her dress was cut low and he could see well within the hollow between her shapely breasts.

"Thanks," he said. "Now take a tip from me and leave Lescott alone." He wheeled and stomped off, thinking what a clever woman she was, and wondering if she had worked her way so deeply into Lescott's heart the man would be unable to break her grip on him. He had heard of such things. He walked straight out of the saloon and across the street toward the jail.

OLD PETE was there, having recovered somewhat from the severe beating he'd taken at the hands of Stell Marshall's bandits. The long wide street of the trail town was busy with traffic. A buckboard traveled swiftly past the jail door, lifting smoky dust. Horses were hitched at the tieracks. Lumber wagons and fringe-topped carriages and small buggies banked the street. There was going to be record breaking business transacted in Liberty tonight. The falsefronts, low and squat like mushrooms, were lit up with bracket lamps that shed a jonquil glow on each plateglass window. The shade under the wooden awnings was deep, and in some places growing in obscurity. The width of the great street made the buildings seem like toy playthings.

A dim saffron moon was beginning to show and the stars were purple and twinkled with a brilliance that brightened the darkness above the roofs of the town. The almost endless rhythm of stomping boots on the board walks and the low-pitched voices of men sent off long, lingering echoes. Over all this was a blanket of choking dust.

Pete was bug-eyed at sight of him. It took five minutes to convince the old man he was all right and really present in the flesh. Then Pete said the sheriff had returned with his posse of twenty men and was now at the livery stable. "Tread carefully, my boy," Pete warned. "Tom Decker is acting strangely and he's under a severe strain."

"You say he has twenty men under him?" Charley engaged in some deep, swift thinking. "When did he get back in town?"

"Right about two hours ago," Pete said. There was something in the deputy's dim eyes the Captain did not understand. Pete made a wide gesture with his gnarled hands. "You'd better call for help," he said. "The posse disbanded and scattered out. Some of those men I wouldn't trust; they stand in too well with Big Mike. Maybe you'd better call for outside assistance. Why not let me go ahead and round up a band of respectable citizens to side you, Charley? They have been trying to organize against the rotten clique that rules this town, but so far they've lacked leadership. I can throw them together in short order."

The Captain nodded. "Raise about twenty-five or thirty," he said. "We don't want the radicals. Tell them we are out to get the Red Ball thieves and road agents. We'll have a hot time in Liberty tonight, but we'll get those renegades before we stop. I want every damned one of those twenty possemen—"

Pete rushed from the office, high-tailed it down the street. The night's blackness swallowed him. The ghostly echoes of his foot stamps came back to the office. Charley loitered in the doorway, listening. Then he left the orange light of the office and sauntered toward the livery stable. He stepped inside the big door. Caution placed a strong hand on him and held him there.

He heard a surreptitious scurry of movement in the rear of the barn. He wondered what had befallen Raymond, why the boy hostler wasn't there. Charley slithered along, his boots making no sound in the dry straw. The rank odor of horses and rancid straw came to him. He paused near a post and got the smell of hot leather. Then a voice spurted out at him, "Who's there?" The sheriff's tone was challenging.

The soldier did not answer. He waited, with bated breath, his hand near his gun. The army holster was high on his belt but he could draw faster from a high positioned holster. The sheriff spoke again: "You'd better not try to pull anything on me! I can see you, Mister!"

Charley moved slowly to one side. But his shadow followed him, long and black. His footsteps in the straw did not make any sound as he moved. The end of the stall row was not far from him on the left of where he stopped, but the space was lit up with the white dirty light from the street. He bent over and moved again. He was about to jump for the other side of the areaway when a gun's explosion ruptured the silence and crackled against the sides and roof of the frame structure. The whisper of it reached him as the slug buried itself in a plank. Now he was against the end stall. He said aloud, "Come on out, Decker. You've played a poor hand. You can't get away—"

Decker said in a low, angry voice, "You better stay where you're at. I know what I'm into and I'm goin' to get out of it; I'm comin' after you. I figger you been checkin' me a long time."

Charley knew if he came out in the open where he could see him, Decker would be in the lamplight. He crouched a little, waiting for the sheriff to expose himself. There was a long slash of street lamp in the wall of the back of the barn. It was about four feet from the ground. A board there was missing; Decker would have to move against this if he came out of hiding. The U.S. officer watched the hole.

Suddenly he remembered the girl he loved, Willa Decker—and he felt a chill run over him. He had been corresponding with Willa a long time; he entertained every intention of marrying her. Patience rocked out of him. He felt a grim reluctance to

go through with this. If he killed Willa's father there would be a bridge made in the situation that Willa would never cross. One straight bullet sent at Decker and he would lose Willa forever.

He heard a deep sigh come from Decker. The rank smell of stale wet straw assailed him as he went on waiting. The debate with himself did not last long. He did not have the choice to make because there came a sudden rattle of revolver shots that sang all around him. He could see the shifting nocturnal shadow back there in the hole in the wall. Decker had sent four shots crashing at him. Charley guessed Decker's hammer was resting on the fifth cartridge.

He found a halter rope with his left hand and hurled it against the boards of the stall, five feet away. He saw the crimson spout from Decker's gun. Then he hammered a slug at the man's legs. He knew he'd hit him in his right leg before the smoke cleared from the Colt's spout. Decker was down, threshing and calling pitifully for him not to shoot again.

But Charley Curtis was too old at this business to be caught off guard; he kept his gun ready as he approached the twisting figure on the floor. Decker reared up in the straw. The soldier was less than six feet away. The heavy gun in the sheriff's right hand swung on a level with him. Charley ducked. But there came nothing but the dry metallic click of the trigger on a spent shell.

BRUCE LESCOTT sat in his hotel bedroom, waiting for Fay Jerrard to come back from the *Paradise*. He had received information from her in a signed note. It had said simply Tom Decker was in possession of a dodger from Topeka which bore his picture and stated a reward of five thousand dollars was offered for him dead or alive. He was accused of rampant murder and destruction of property and even robbery. He was labeled the "Man on The Dun Horse". Officers of the state of Kansas were warned that the "Man on The Dun Horse" would kill maliciously and was an expert with his guns.

The information had broken his will to stay in Liberty and he now was on the verge of decamping for more placid surroundings. He had known all along this would happen. They had made him too prominent, and his dastardly work had been of such a singular nature as to stamp him as the Number One marauder of all the bushwhackers. Quantrill's name had been mentioned several times, Quantrill, the lawless one, the butcher, the man who had brought woe to Kansas. He ranked with John Brown and a hangman's noose awaited him. The border had never known a more fiendish demon than the "Man on The Dun Horse," who was Quantrill's right-hand man.

As he sat on the edge of the mattress he could see the noose hanging down on the garish wall, a shadow long and swinging like a clock's pendulum. He scowled at the image and pushed his sodbuster to the back of his head. He was sweaty and tired and far from alert because of his long hours of vigilance. He peered through the curling cigarette smoke, tracing aimless designs on the bed's counter-pane. A few hours before he had basked here in sedate contentment, and had hoped he would be able to escape the trap fate seemed to have set for him.

The girl was the one bright spot—the girl and the kid at the livery-stable. His desires were few and very simple and generous. He wanted to do something for both those little people. Funny how he'd taken a fancy to the boy at the barn and found sympathy for him in his ragged and under-nourished condition. But he suddenly remembered he'd never been harsh where women and kids were concerned; they had always been able to touch him and even in his worst orgies he had gone out of his way to spare the weak.

He knew he was a man meant for riding the dusty trails without ever finding any peace. He had raw edges to him, of course, but he'd tried to tone these down. He was the kind of a man who had seldom laughed, who

had found nothing in life to laugh about. When a kid he had looked on the dark side of things. He had always loved animals. But circumstances had weighted his shoulders down with responsibilities and there always had been some tough problem for him to struggle with; and so he was enmeshed in the thin strands of a cruel net.

He tapered up a cigarette and lighted it and crossed to the open window. He drummed his knuckles against the sill. He had the sensation of being encompassed, of not being able to smash his way out of a hard shell that enclosed him. He needed something he'd been unable to find. Perhaps it was the consolation a true friend could give him and because of his suspicious mind he had not let himself go completely when he had found those who offered their friendship. He had come closer to giving way entirely to the girl. Fay Jerrard had given him a taste of consolation and in being consoled by her he had relaxed from his terrible, exacting vigilance. He moved idly across the room and placed his shoulders against the door. He watched the smoke curl away from his cigarette. That reward poster would seal his tomb shut; he would be inexorably imprisoned.

He had become sick inside and the four walls of the room were bearing in heavily upon him so he couldn't breathe without difficulty. It was tough to be alone; he'd fought grimly against being alone. He couldn't keep things out of his mind when alone. Without realizing it, his hunger for companionship had led him into accepting the girl without knowing anything about her save what she had told him. Her great vitality had enslaved him.

Now he knew it would be harder than ever to find friends. Anyone who chanced to find favor in his sight would be tempted to kill him for the reward and for the glory that would come from murdering him. He would go around now with a target on his back. Five thousand dollars was a large sum of money; it would tempt most people. And since the reward posters were being sent to peace officers throughout Kansas, Lescott was sure he'd be unable to avoid the countless pitfalls those posters had set for him. He could not even get back to Missouri where he should have gone in the first place. Only there a crime back in Saint Joe which was charged to him and the minute he set foot in that town he would be arrested or he would have to kill to keep from being arrested. He had suddenly and irrefutably grown tired of killing.

He heard footsteps in the hall and these stopped outside his door. He quickly shifted his position and drew his right hand Colt. His sweaty palm was against the warm pearl of the butt and his heart had stopped thumping against his ribs. He despaired because he knew that from now on his life would always be like that.

The knock came again, louder this time. The thin panel gave the sound a hollow drumlike effect. The lines deepened in his brown face as he opened the door and lifted the gun so it covered the person standing on the threshold outside.

13

AS SOON as Lescott and Curtis had ridden away and left them, the little band of outlaws headed by Stell Marshall saddled their horses. Stell thought the wise course lay in following the Arkansas river, but John Howard pointed out that Sheriff Decker and his posse might be headed their way down stream. There were only four of them now, not counting Stell and four men against twenty made big odds.

Tex agreed with Howard, so they struck off in the opposite direction, taking good care of their prisoner. Big Mike Fanning rode his sorrell with a silent, thoughtful expression

on his sullen face. Stell led them straight back to the cabin where not long ago she had experienced her close call to death at the hands of Big Mike.

They came within sight of the house. There was no indication of danger; they could rest here all night and get an early start in the morning. Stell was saddled with the responsibility of disposing of the leader of the white-hoods since Curtis had left him with her so she would not be attacked by the rival band of owlhoots. As long as she had Mike a captive they would be safe, unless the hoods decided to try a surprise attack. This seemed less than a remote possibility.

The sun was close to the tops of the tall cottonwoods when they crossed the plank bridge and turned in through the pole gate. Tex rode beside Mike, and Howard and his two companions followed Stell. She rode a pinto. Her hair streamed in the hot wind behind her. She carried her carbine across her richly ornamented saddle. It was so hot the metal trappings burned her ungloved hands.

The silence of the big bodied trees lay around them. The underbrush was motionless except when gusts of the red hot wind touched it. Now and then came the slight tinkle of bridle metal as a horse lolled back his lips and champed on the bits with his solid teeth.

They crossed the narrow cattled trail that came in from the west. The earth was marked with old wagon tracks. There had been small traffic here in the recent months since the abandonment of the Circle C. They were not in any hurry and Stell set a leisurely pace. Smoke was still coming faintly from the huge chimney at the end of the cabin. The dirty windows gleamed in the sunlight. Far back in the woods they heard the wild creatures taking flight. A panther thumped down from a tree and fled.

Stell could not get Bruce Lescott out of her mind. She felt he was a fugitive the same as she, and wondered if Curtis would find out the truth about him. She had heard a great deal about the U.S. officer. He was peerless as a gunfighter. He had been a scourge that made men waver and tremble when his name was mentioned in the midst of those who lived covert lives. She recalled her own experiences with the soldier, how he had outsmarted her once and escaped when she'd fully intended to kill him.

Stell knew the Captain could not have done other than he had because of Lescott. The latter was a man whose judgment he respected. She felt there would develop, if nothing happened to mar it, a splendid friendship between the two men. They were as different as day and night, but each was a powerful personality in his own right, and each was silent and given to thinking things out in advance. If anything Lescott was the most impulsive of the pair. Besides, she was sure he was the most dangerous. What would happen if Curtis learned he was riding with a fugitive? There would be a fight. Lescott would not be taken without an effort to protect himself.

But Curtis owed Lescott his life. He had given her a break and the chances were he would give Lescott one, if the situation warranted it. Her turbulent realization that she had fallen in love with a man she would never see again grew until she was nervous and sorrowful. Love had come to her and perished before it had stood a chance, and she regretted having ever met the object of her affections.

A LITTLE LATER on they removed their saddle gear in the lean-to, and carried these into the house. Stell felt better, once she'd made hot coffee and fried some venison on the coals in the grate of the big stone affair. Mike Fanning was again locked into the bedroom where Stell had kept Charley Curtis a captive for hours.

She had almost decided to dispatch the leader of the Red Ball wagons when a better thought struck her. She could leave him outside in the sun, thonged with rawhide soaked in

water. There was a streak of cruelty in her but it hadn't always been there. Fanning had tried to kill her; he would return to Liberty and kill Lescott if he got his chance. She did not want him to get that chance. Her hatred for the man deepened the bitterness in her heart.

They ate at the table in the big room and the men went outside to make their camp. It was too hot to stay in the cabin. The night would be cool, but even at that it would be uncomfortable inside, and these stern-lipped men were used to sleeping under the stars. For that matter, she was herself and it was only because she had the cabin alone and a cozy bunk that she decline to make a bed outside.

The men stationed themselves at various vantage points where, in case of an emergency, they would be best able to take care of themselves. She left Tex in the house to stand at the prison door while she went down to the river for water. She filled her canteen and a small canvas holder. She sat on a log and watched silver fish play in the clear stream. The boiling current lulled her to a restful mood.

She was unable to banish thoughts of Lescott and out here beside the river she tapered a cigarette, lighted it and allowed her mind to go back over the happy though distressing moments she had spent with Lescott by her side. She did not understand why he had failed to find her interesting.

Other men had fought for her and had wanted her enough to kill for her companionship. She had not given herself cheaply to anyone; she'd had disappointments but none had hurt her as much as Lescott's lack of interest in her as a woman.

She remained silent in the shadows of the whistling water, feeling the deepness of her hurt, but her will was as strong as steel and it stood by her now.

When she walked back to the cabin she thought it strange the men were not to be seen. She called softly for John Howard, but the latter failed to answer. A little startlement assailed her but she fought it down. She had picked her companions carefully as possible in such a field and she had exercised care to keep them together. She had never dreamed of being deserted, although there often had been quarrels and they had exchanged harsh words.

Something reached out a warning hand and slowed her steps as she approached the door. The old realization that there was no honor among thieves came back, rushing upon her with wicked force. They had their price and she knew they could have been bought off time and time again when she had enforced some decision which had not met with their entire approval. There had been times when a large fear had grappled with her that any man in her group of renegades would kill her for the reward offered by the state if such had been possible. She had been cautious about turning her back after one of those bitter disagreements.

But sighing deeply, Stell went on into the house. She walked across the threshold, her eyes alert, her nerves bothering her. Then she found the man standing against the wall, flattenened there and swung about, reaching for the knife in her belt. Too late she drew it.

Mike Fanning had secured a dreadful hold on the nape of her neck. She was forced to her knees and held there, and she struggled to reach her feet and knew she would never accomplish her purpose. A cruel laugh fell from the gloating man's lips.

He kept forcing her head down. He struck her on the head with his fist. He held her, yanking hard on her to keep her from going down. He bent her left arm and she dropped the knife from her right hand. Her face was almost touching the floor and her hair was down over her head. She cursed and wriggled and fell forward, and he fell forward with her. He was on his side and she was on her side, and he shifted his position so he had hold of her throat.

He shoved out with his brutal strength and threw one powerful leg over her body. She was helpless to move and he kept leering at her

when she had lolled her head until she could see through her yellow hair. He was going to kill her; she knew that as well as she knew anything. He was gorping behind him with one hand, trying to find the Bowie knife she had lost.

She saw his hand come away from his back, saw the blade scintillate in the lamplight. He kept pushing her head back until she knew her throat, with its full softness, was exposed to that sharp knife blade. He was still leering at her. His eyes held the lustre of murder. He was parting his lips in a wolfish snarl. He now brought the knife up and ripped it down the front of her gauzelike shirt; she twisted away, sent hard blows raining in his face. He danced away, satisfied he had the upper hand. She ran at him when he backed off. He thrust the Bowie knife out. She did not see it in time; she ran against it...

BIG MIKE FANNING was in a hurry to get back to town. He had miraculously escaped the fate the blonde panther had planned for him. He stared down at her dead face and a dim smile curled his lips. There was no rage in the expression. Rather there was surprise, and hurt and helplessness. Gone from the death mask was the fury, the cruel lines, the strength. She was more like a child asleep on the floor and Fanning, as rude and crude as he was, thought a rag doll belonged in her arms.

He shrugged, and crossing to the wash bench, poured water into a pan and scrubbed the blood off of his hands. He moved rapidly and there was a hard droop to the corners of his unfeeling mouth. He took pains to comb his hair, and looked at himself in a cracked looking glass he dug up, then the most human gesture the man had ever made in his life followed. He took a blanket off the bed in the room in which he had been held a prisoner, and walking over to the immobile form of the corpse, he covered her with the blanket. He shrugged again and then walked out of the cabin, taking his Colts which he found where they had been left for him. He buckled on the wide belt, and in the leanto found his horse. It was saddled and bridled, and he was soon traveling swiftly away from the house, digging his spurs into his steed with brutal force.

The horse hit the wagon bridge and thumped a drum across the vista. The sound could be heard far back across the plains. His fiendish desire was to reach Liberty in time to stave off what he knew would be complete ruination of his business and his life. The odds were against him. Two men stood in his way. One of them was a soldier, an army officer whose reputation as a gunfighter was known throughout the west. The other was a strange, dangerous man about whom Big Mike knew practically nothing but guessed a lot. He meant to dispatch these two blocking obstacles to Boothill and then he would set about straightening things out, aware that Tom Decker would lend him a hand.

14

SHERIFF Tom Decker sat with his back to the wall and sobbed, "I've made a mess of my life. It wasn't because I wanted to. I'm a good man at heart. But Mike Fanning made me. I got afraid of Big Mike. He said he would kill me if I didn't bend to his will. It was terrible. I had to shield the White Hoods, knowing full well I was violating my oath of office. I thought of Willa and how much she meant to me. And now—now Big Mike's coming back. You'd better hike out of here. You're a great gunfighter, Curtis; you're one of the best; but Mike—he's better. You don't know how Mike Fanning can use a gun—"

Charley bent down over the wounded man, saw blood streaming from Decker's bullet torn leg. He

made a bandage out of his handkerchief, tied this on to the end of Decker's and wrapped the bandage around the wound. It was serious and the blood wouldn't stop coming out of the hole. Charley knew he would have to get a doctor for the sheriff.

"What makes you say Mike's coming back?" His voice was curious but there was no anxiety in it. He did not talk as he felt, because he was startled by Decker's words. "He can't come back—"

"Oh, yes, but he can. He's on his way here now. He'll kill me; he'll kill you. I know something else, too. Your friend Lescott is a fugitive, he's wanted by the state of Kansas. He's a killer. He's the "Man on The Dun Horse". He—" The sheriff's hands were busy dragging out a crumpled poster which he had hidden inside his shirt. He spread it out, wincing because the pain in his leg was sharp and nauseating. "Look," he said, "it's his picture. He's a wholesale killer of women and babies. He's no good. You can get five thousand by shooting the craven skunk, Charley. He's at the hotel. If you don't shoot him like the dog he is, somebody else will do it and they'll get the reward. Somebody will shoot him in the back; he's another whirlwind with a gun."

Charley shook his head under the savage impact of this information. Now he knew why Lescott had sided Stell Marshall. But that did not explain why the fugitive had come to his rescue when the two attempts had been made to kill him. Despite the poster's warning and its dour message, the Captain still believed Lescott to be a square shooter. Maybe he was wanted; maybe he was a killer; but he hadn't done what the poster accused him of doing—he had not destroyed women and children and babies. No...there was no evidence that he had seen to establish such as a fact. Charley Curtis found himself far from influenced by the poster. He still maintained the same opinion. The fugitive had helped the ragged urchin at the stable; he had helped others.

The Captain reached out and shook Decker. The sheriff was growing too weak to talk. "Don't stall," he said, "how do you know Mike Fanning is coming back to Liberty?"

Tom Decker peered up and his eyes were dull. "I reckon I heard the whole thing. Mike outsmarted Stell by buying her men away from her. He paid them in gold and they deserted her. Or they were going to desert her the last I heard. Don't underestimate Big Mike; he'll kill her, and then he'll come back here and kill anybody else that has harmed him. I know the man, Captain. He's—bad—medicine—"

Charley moved quickly out to the sidewalk. The street was practically empty. The lamps were dim. He did not hesitate. He dashed off, his boots stamped the sidewalk with a grim tattoo. He stopped at the doctor's office. The old man was in. He sent him to the barn to attend Decker. Then he headed for the *Paradise*. He figured Lescott would be there. But he did not know for sure. He reached the batwings. Two cowboys coming out smashed into him. Charley recovered and made a lunge for the door.

He stood inside the door, cold and with a crazy feeling running through him. He felt clammy sweat on the back of his neck and it stuck to his face, running slowly down across his cheeks. His eyes flashed as he let them move swiftly over the saloon. The sweat bothered him, was icy. The palms of his big hands were sweaty, too. His shirt adhered to his back, stuck there by the glue of the sweat. He looked around, spotted the girl and went hurriedly toward Fay Jerrard. She rose quickly to her feet, startled by his dramatic appearance.

THE SPACIOUS room was barren of patrons. Except for two men at the mahogany bar the room was empty. Even the piano and the chairs for the string band were vacant. At this time in the evening this was unusual. He wondered vaguely why there was no business. He stopped before Fay Jerrard and snapped at her, "Where's Bruce Lescott? Don't waste time. Is he here?"

"What do you want with Lescott?" she said coldly. "I wouldn't tell you if I knew. You'd better seek your information elsewhere, Charley. There's a lot of excitement in this town and trouble, and I don't want to be dragged into it. The Vigilantes are meeting. They're determined to give Liberty a good housecleaning. But you know about that, of course; I hear you started it."

"Where's Lescott?" he repeated. He grabbed her shoulder and swung her around and she looked spitefully at him. "I've got a big notion to jail you, sister. You're a suspect in the robbery of the Omaha Army Post; you're one of Mike Fanning's little girl friends. I know all about your trick of pulling the wool over Lescott's eyes because Fanning set you onto him, to watch him so he wouldn't get in Mike's hair. You're a careless girl, Fay; you leave tracks like a bear or a wolf in the snow. I can see through you. Now tell me what you've done with Lescott and make it pronto?"

"He left town," she said coldly. She rubbed her cheek with a balled fist and shook Charley's hand off her shoulder. "He's riding out to see what's happened to Stell Marshall. Maybe he's in love with her; who knows?"

"You're lying and you know it," Charley rapped at her. "I want the truth."

"You've got it," she said with mock seriousness. "Now get out of here and leave me alone. I've never caused you any trouble."

He turned sharply on his heel, strode vigorously to the batwings and stepped back out into the street. He stood there a moment, searching the sidewalks and the road, but seeing nothing of Lescott he whirled round and glanced back into the saloon. Fay Jerrard had disappeared. The table by which she had been seated when he'd entered the room was deserted. He swore and started briskly away from the *Paradise*, traveling back toward the barn. It never occurred to him that Bruce Lescott was in his room at the hotel.

THE VIGILANTES had taken over the town. Liberty's lawless element had made itself scarce or was in progress of doing so. Fifty men with ropes and guns and swaggering in their boots and highly polished shoes, came roaring through the main street, headed by Old Pete the deputy.

They swung past the livery stable and stopped. One of the men, a tall, skinny individual wearing a stovepipe hat and a swallow tailed coat, held up a lantern. By it's dirty gleam he could see the faces of the tense members of his hastily formed organization. He got up on the walk, faced them and handed the lantern to Old Pete. Dust rose like smoke.

"Gents," he said, "we've got to do this thing right. We've been putting up with it long enough and this is our big chance. We've got no law, because the law's got no decent representatives in Liberty, Kansas, save for Old Pete here and the U.S. officer, Charley Curtis. We have to help them; we'd be poor citizens if we didn't. I've been an undertaker here ever since the first store building was erected. I've seen good men move in and out because they wasn't safe here. I've seen men pin badges on their shirts and go out and get shot down by Mike Fanning's hired gun fighters. I've seen bad women ruin good men right here in the two honky tonks that are hell's front doors, Gents. Now let's start by burning them two honky-tonks to the ground. Number one on my list is the *Paradise*—" Sam Bright paused eloquently and dusted his tall hat.

A wild cheering greeted the closing of his words. He waxed enthusiastic at this gigantic reception, and inspired he removed his hat and bowed, and then he lifted his voice again in an oratory fashion.

"Listen, Gents," he said, "we've got some hanging to do. We all know Big Mike Fanning. We must put the rope around his neck and leave him swinging from a cottonwood for an example. His carcass will scare the others and they'll fight shy of Liberty. We want a town here we can be proud of, where we can rear

our children and they can rear their children. We want law and order, and peace and prosperity, all of which we can have if we do this thing up in good shape. I appoint John Hogan and Phil Sherman out there to act as my lieutenants. What that dirty scoundrel Quantrill did to Lawrence, we can do to Liberty, only we'll get them that don't deserve to live."

He climbed down off the walk, poked his stovepipe hat back on his head and turned his sharp featured, long nosed face toward the first target of his rage. He waved a long skeletal arm, and with Old Pete jogging alongside of him, he led his justice hungry followers down the wide dusty throughfare, not to stop until he had come abreast of the *Paradise*.

Flares were quickly produced and in the crimson reflections the undertaker was seen to scurry like a rat toward the low frame building. He achieved the batwings, pried them open, and waving at his men to come forward with the flares, he grabbed one and hurled it into the room.

The next minute the window turned scarlet and flames began to lick at the plateglass.

Charley Curtis had just left the stable, aroused by the undertaker's high-pitched voice and the wild cries of his followers. With him was Raymond. The boy wore brand new cowhide boots and new overalls. He also had on a clean new shirt. They ran up the street, Charley bent upon stopping this wanton destruction before it had gone too far. It was insane to think you could drive a bargain with outlaws by trying to burn their habitats. Suddenly Raymond shouted at the Captain. He had paused and, panting, stood looking back. The sky was aflame, it seemed. A great red and yellow holocaust rose against the stars, smoke billowing in huge funnels on the hot wind. The fire was at the livery stable. "Look, Mister Curtis—they've set the barn on fire!"

The boy was running now. Charley whirled and started after him, but the kid had not stopped, despite the rushing flames that poured out of the big doorway. Smoke puffed out in large volumes. It was choking, nauseating and Charley hesitated to plunge into the inferno. A crowd was dashing down the middle of the street. They y e l l e d themselves hoarse. A bell in front of the newspaper office beat a metallic warning.

Charley was pushed roughly aside. He hadn't seen the man. He'd appeared magically and he disappeared into the flaming screen. Charley called to him. There was no answer.

LESCOTT held his handkerchief around his nose and mouth and ducked the falling rafters and beams as he rushed forward. He reached the stalls, strangling despite his protection to keep the smoke out of his lungs. He found Missouri. Horses screamed and pranced about, kicking the stall boards. They tugged at their halter ropes. They were frantic. The heat was unbearable. Dry straw on the floor caught flames and licked out greedily, stabbing at Lescott's legs.

He got his horse by the halter, slit the rope with a knife. He started him back toward the street. He slapped his rump. Missouri ran straight toward the screen. Lescott wheeled and ran back to release the other horses and started each one toward safety the way he had directed his own horse to safety. They stampeded, whirled, spooked and were confused, frightened by the flames and the clouds of impenetrable smoke. It was hard to get them under control again. But the aisle into which he had driven them was n a r r o w and he avoided being trampled to death by moving swiftly back against the row of stalls. He finally got behind the horses, and, slapping at them with his hat and yelling, he marshaled them into order and they slowly moved forward. They were almost to the open door when a falling timber crashed to the floor and scattered a constellation of sparks and pieces of burning wood. The horses s t o p p e d, scrambled

around shoving against each other and were about to stampede again, when Lescott, spraddle-legged, slapped the first horse with his hat and the animal spun, milling into the others and they all followed him to the open door of the barn. It was over then, with the exception of Lescott's search for Raymond. The hissing, crackling, sputtering sounds were loud.

He felt around, groping through the smoke and the tongues of fire until he came to the carriage room, and there he found Ray, prostrate on the floor, pinned under a wrecked door which had fallen from its hinges. He grabbed the boy up, and with the searing spears of crimson spurting out, his lungs caving in, his breath a burning cinder in his throat that he could not dislodge. Sweat rained from him and the night air chilled him.

Charley Curtis had not dared leave the position where he stood; he was watching a group of men huddled together who displayed carbines and kept to the covert shadows of the distant feed store building. A small vacant lot seperated the two structures. The smell of resin and water drenched flames was pungent on the wind. All along the street for a block the fires were raging, and Lescott lay the kid on the sidewalk and bent down over him.

"You'll be all right, little fellow," he said. He saw Raymond's eyelids flutter, he saw his regular breathing and the color coming back into his face. He turned to Charley Curtis. "Partner, take care of him. I'm going to find my horse."

"I hitched him out there to the tierack," Charley said, with deep admiration in his voice. "Lescott, I've got to hand it to you, fellow. You're the greatest man I've ever known—"

Lescott rode Missouri back to the hotel and tied him to the post in front of the building.

A voice hailed him, coming from vicinity of the parked Concord. All this was in curdled abony. The potty reports of a gun sounded and Lescott knew the enemy was hidden in the concord and raking him with a deliberately stalking fire. He beat it back the way he had come, edged around the porch and waited. Then he circled the hotel, came down through the alley and was almost even with the Concord when he heard one of the doors creak open. He suddenly plunged.

THE STALKER was Rufe Allan. The bully was armed with a six gun which he slashed downward at Lescott's skull. Lescott made a grab at Allan's Colt. Allan's wild thrown arm caught him across the mouth, smashed his lips back against his teeth. He quit trying for the gun and hurled a hard fist against the other man's face. He felt one of the bully's eyes grow pulpy and draw back in his head. He used the butt of his own right side gun to hammer his antagonist back against the Concord. Again he found the ruffian's face and slugged at it, while Allan drove a sledging fist into his mouth.

Against the Concord they fought desperately. From up and down the street came hoarse yells and flaring torches dispersed the blackness, streaking it with fire that danced and weaved across the throughfare in both directions. Lescott struck wildly and with killing force, the old fury aroused in him, blinded him to everything but his object. He would kill this man; he would crush his brains out like he'd bust the kernel of a walnut. He felt the cruel impact of Allan's gun on his forehead, went to his knees, holding on. He came up inch by inch, breaking the bully away from him. Suddenly Allan whirled, clambered out of his path, raced around the stagecoach and crawled quickly inside. Lescott started to get on the step, and saw the bully's gun swing downward. He grabbed the barrel, wrenched at it, but could not dislodge the weapon. The hammer clicked and Lescott let go and dropped to the ground just as the Colt exploded over his head. On his back, with heels in the air he

triggered his own gun and saw the flash of crimson dart at Allan. The slug tore a brutal hole in the bully's evil face. The whole face turned to a geranium red.

Lescott walked slowly toward the porch, thankful he had seen the fire and got there in time to rescue his horse. If anything had happened to Missouri he knew it would have been a blow that would have stopped him and no doubt he would have given up the struggle. But he had a wicked feeling for the one who had ignited the phoenix trap. "*Brother,*" he thought, "*if I find out your name I'll riddle you with slugs and stamp your face out of shape.*" He completely forgot the man he had just killed; it didn't matter.

The Vigilantes were no concern of his as long as they left the hotel alone. He didn't care if they burned the whole damn town. He strode up the steps and heard men clomping down the planks of the walk, and he turned back to watch them. They came on up to the foot of the steps and one of them mounted the stairway slowly. He was the undertaker, Sam Bright.

"We just want you to know, Mister," he said. "We just want you to know we didn't set fire to th' barn; we don't burn horses alive. We're after justice and there ain't no justice in that. Dumb animals are my friends. No one has more admiration for a hoss than I have. The men in this group are not the kind to do that. I figger Mike Fanning and his renegades are behind that fire and we'll find them. There's another thing, stranger—we are pleased to tell you that as long as we live, any of us, we'll remember what you done tonight. You saved all them hosses and you rescued that poor little kid who would've burned to death since there ain't nothin' left of th' barn." He skewed round and waving his tall hat at the crowd, said loudly, "Give this here gent a send-off, boys—"

Lescott bowed and walked through the hotel lobby while the wild cries and cheers continued in the street behind him.

CURTIS THOUGHT how foolish it was for the so called Vigilantes to even think of starting any more fires. He didn't believe the barn had been burned by them, but he knew they were headed for the Red Ball wagon yard.

He walked rapidly to overtake them, after leaving Raymond with the doctor. The boy would be all right. Charley overhauled the mob at the door of the wagon yard office; he held a torch above his head as he said loud and firm, "Gents, you're breaking the law in carrying on this attack on the harmless buildings. You can't profit by burning property, no matter what you think. Go after the Red Ball outfit and hang them if you think they are guilty, because they can't be handled by the few officers in Liberty. In fact we have no law enforcement officers left save Pete, and he's with you."

The crowd was turned back by his short plea. But they were hell-bent to hold a hanging bee...

Fay Jerrard had learned of Lescott's valor. He was slightly burned on face and hands. She wanted to call the doctor, but he refused to let her do this. He was thinking of the telltale scars that would give him away. He had been battered, too, by the fists of Rufe Allan.

When he had opened the door before going to the fire he had found her standing in the hall. She had come in to spend a little while with him and had waited while he was away at the inferno. He had seen the flames rising from the barn and thought of Missouri and the kid.

She was waiting when he returned. She touched him timidly on the arm. He pressed her against him, smelling of smoke. He was not a handsome man; he was not a tall man. But there was something majestic and compelling about him. Her eyes were soft with mystery.

She stood with her back to the door.

"You have distinguished yourself in our town tonight. Did you see Charley Curtis?"

"Yes," he said, but that was all.

She held the knob with one hand behind her, "He knows about the reward poster," she finished.

"I guess he has found out," Lescott said. "But he didn't say anything. There's nothing I can do about it."

"Bruce, you be careful. Don't leave this room again tonight. The town is crammed full of maniacs and they're hell-bent to hang all the renegades they can find. Despite your noble deeds they will single you out, if they learn the truth; they'll lynch you, too. You know how they feel toward you. The raid on Lawrence has created a sensation out here. The free staters want the blood of all who participated in the battle of Lawrence."

He did not say anything; he walked to the bed and sat down on the edge of it. He clumsily made a cigarette, handicapped by his bandaged fingers. She came to him and lighted the smoke and he inhaled deeply and she shook out the match.

"Why don't you take off those heavy guns?" she suggested softly, "and pull off that smoke-soiled shirt. Make yourself comfortable. Here, I'll help you."

He obeyed her, rising and unbuckling his shell belts and handing the Colts to her. She moved over to a small table and placed the guns upon it, and then returned to the bed and helped him peel the dirty shirt off his head. He sat there in his undershirt, his black hair wet with sweat and sticking to his forehead.

"You're a marked man now," she said, taking the shirt to a clothes closet and tossing it inside and turning around to look at him. She put her hands on her hips. Through the open window came the turbulent sounds of the Vigilantes running about and shouting to each other.

"Yes, I reckon I am a marked man," he admitted ruefully. "I'll have to get away from here. Look down over the porch rail and see if my horse is all right."

She went out and came back. "Five thousand dollars for you, dead or alive. What a lot of money. You don't know how much it is to someone who never had a third that much money, Bruce. Whew! In this day and age it's a fortune. Take me, I've never had that much money in my life. I've always tried to imagine what it would be like to have money and not have to worry about the future."

SHE WAS watching him with a closer surveillance; she saw something that bordered on stoicism coming into his face. He started to speak, but he changed his mind. Then an onrush of words falling from her red mouth interrupted his thoughts. "I don't know what to do for you. It would be crazy for me to leave here with you. I guess you know how I feel. I tried to make myself feel different; if a woman doesn't, though, she doesn't. When a fire goes out in a woman she gets awfully cold."

She was making it pretty tough for him. He wondered if she was trying to make it that way. Something rough and jolting and burning ran along the fine wires of his nerves. He thought he would walk out.

"You don't have to worry about me," he said. "I don't want anyone to worry about me. The world is a savage thing. Full of deceit and treachery and torment. Men have put a curse upon it. When I was going to college I thought I'd become something big and clean and honourable, but I've wound up worse than the lowest tramp. I started clean enough, but there was too much dirt and I got some of it on me. Every man has his dreams and I've had mine. They're embers now. It's a sad thing but you never start flames to coming from the embers of dreams." He moved to the door.

She reached out and touched him and let her hand fall away.

"There's good in everybody. They

all have their dreams in their heads. A woman smiled at me once; I never got over it. I had friends once, but I don't have them now. I saw a shower of stars and the woman's face in every one of them. The stars just let go and fell out of the sky and when I look up there I never see a star any more. I guess you understand why that is. Yes—the world is a brutal place—"

"Are you sorry for all those killings, Lescott?"

He did not answer her. He swiveled around, went to the bed and sat down on the edge of the mattress. He buried his head in his hands. He heard her move across the floor, heard her at the window blind. He was silently answering the question she had asked him, but she would never know what the answer was. The silence in the room became so great that every sound in the street was magnified and made a roar as it came in through the open window.

15

CHARLEY CURTIS had put down the turbulent beginning of the Vigilantes. He reproved the undertaker and had pounded some sense into his skull. The skinny one waved his rope with the hangman's noose in it. He led his men across the street and down to the jail. Charley told them he'd join them there pretty soon, told them to wait and not to do anything until he was with them. Then he stomped off through the lemon-stained haze.

He slid into the saloon where the fire had been extinguished and the smoke was belching up from the water drenched floor. He walked on toward the office, knowing the place was deserted. He felt sorry for Gunther, a man with a family who had tried to make a living running the *Paradise*. Gunther wasn't a bad sort. He had a wife who could spend more than ten men could bring into her, but his kids were decent. All Gunther had was this business and the profits he made from it.

Charley moved with stealth because he wasn't sure he was safe. He was worried about Big Mike Fanning. He ascended the steps to the gallery and traversed this to the office. He went in and stood there looking at the roll top desk. He wondered how much money Mike Fanning had lost at faro. He'd heard that the renegade leader had played the game to the tune of a half million dollars loss. He found Gunther's books and this was true; this was a certified fact when he left the saloon's office and started down the staircase.

He heard a sound and peering through the cloud of lazily moving black smoke saw a man in the middle of the floor who stood spraddle-legged and watched him. He was astonished when he found the man to be Big Mike Fanning.

Strapped around the giant's waist was a wide cartridge belt that sagged on the right side where a hickory handled Colt dragged it down. Fanning was clad in a black woolen shirt open at the throat and black close fitting trousers. His red hair was disheveled and there were several scratches on his face that left the torn flesh raw and blood streaked.

The toughest moment of Charley's life found him poised and cool. He was too cold in fact to feel anything. His nerves jerked at him, but he went on down the steps toward the waiting killer. He stopped at the foot of the stairs and studied his man with a tranquillity in his posture.

Sight of Mike Fanning made him colder and colder. Now, all at once his heart began to slug against his chest an he could feel the fitful throb of each beat in the artery in his neck. The impulse to draw was great, but he knew it wasn't time. He was directly in front of the man

and less than forty feet separated them.

"I'm going to kill you, Curtis." Mike Fanning canted his head. "They say you're the fastest man in this country with your gun. You'd better be, for I claim that honor, myself. I just want you to know I put a knife in Stell Marshall's heart and she's dead out there in the line cabin. You figgered you had everything just where you wanted it, you and that Lescott. After I finish with you here, I'm going over to the hotel and finish with him."

The giant's hand moved an inch, and Charley watching it, moved his hand, too. This was the way they stood, looking intently at each other, with the wet smoke circling around them, ready to draw on each other and each ready and willing to die if it had to be that way. Fanning had a quick dogged mind. Charley's mind was quicker. Fanning pulled his wide shoulders down and made a pushing movement toward his gun. Light struck up a swift glinting as the Colt leaped from his black holster.

There were two shots. One explosion ran into the other. Fanning's bullet whistled shrilly through the stillness of the big room. The flame that jumped from the gun broke and the sparks fell out in a burst like a reddish yellow rose opening. Or it was like a fan had been quickly opened. The ballooning light vanished. Smoke drifted away from the Colt before Mike Fanning started to spin, and lurched away with blood leaking through a hole in the chest of his shirt. His knees hit the floor hard. He threw his long arms above his head. When he crashed down he smashed his nose against the floor of the saloon and exploded the sawdust into angry little puffs.

IN MORTAL fear and desperation the Red Ball men had given themselves away. No doubt they considered themselves as good as caught and so they banded together and fought it out with the Vigilantes. They'd hoped to leave the country but none of them had organization enough about himself to lead his followers to safety on the plains. They had opened fire on the justice-seekers the minute they had accosted an unsavory character named Jones who had been suspected of rustling cattle a long time and had dragged him toward a porch awning and placed a rope around his neck.

Jones was hanged despite their gunfire and swung, a grisly reminder of the Biblical warning that the way of the transgressor was hard. The rattle of rifle and pistol fire flung long echoes across the town and Bruce Lescott sitting on his bed, with his head buried in his hands, heard the disturbance and shrugged. He was unable to think; he had reached the end of the road. He knew this as well as he knew anything. There was no hope.

The girl at the window had not stirred. She was watching Lescott closely and the mystery was still in her eyes. Her deep breasts moved with her deep breathing and the sweat came through her red gown and left big dark splotches. She moved her hand slowly, let it touch a drop of sweat on her chin. She rubbed it away, not taking her dark eyes off the back of Lescott's head. Her tantalizing lips curved themselves into a slow smile.

COLONEL W. J. Cole got off the stagecoach that pulled into Liberty that night and walked straight to the hotel. He was alone and carried a satchel. In his other hand was a new army rifle. He wore his blue uniform and elaborate military decorations which clinked with each long stride. His boots were newly polished, his mustache neatly trimmed, his long black curly hair hung almost to his shoulders. He was not a large man but his straight carriage gave the impression of bigness.

He climbed the hotel's steps to the long cool porch. Here he paused to light a stogie and looked off down the street. He had expected to see some sign of Captain Charley Curtis,

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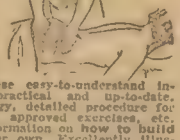

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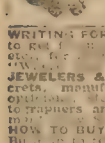

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but thought probably his telegram to the young officer in charge of the investigation into the disappearance of the stolen army rifles had miscarried. Curtis was not one to miss being on hand to greet a superior officer.

It was cool out here and Cole wanted to exercise his legs. He went on into the hotel, registered at the desk and paid the dude clerk and then walked back out on the porch, after depositing his satchel for safe keeping. Curtis would be showing up sooner or later.

Colonel W. J. Cole did not dislike whiskey, especially when tired and in need of refreshment. He saw the saloon's painted doors across the dusty street, looked reluctantly down at his bright black boots and then, sighing, allowed the temptation to sway him. He sauntered out into the powder dry dust and looked up at the polkydot sky. The stars were as bright as his boots. As he neared the saloon he thought of the reward posters he carried folded up in his jacket pocket. He removed these, and when he entered the saloon he took a few thumb tacks from his pocket and from a small leather poke, and fastened a poster where it attracted immediate attention, on the wall beside the front door. He stuck another poster on a wooden pillar near the piano.

This bill posting was practically a religious rite with him. He was not a man to forget—he carried his rifle in the bend of his left arm.

LESCOTT was thinking about his ride into Liberty, how he'd saved Stell Marshall from falling into the hands of Tom Decker's party. He thought vividly of the tumult that had ridden away from Lawrence with him and echoed constantly in his brain. He had tried to adjust matters, seeking the only way fate had left open to him, and he had failed. He might have been Charley Curtis' friend; Charley might have been his. He had found

(Continued On Page 86)

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COMPLETE COWBOY NOVEL MAGAZINE

(Continued From Page 84)

Stell Marshall loyal to him; he should have stayed with her. He had made a serious mistake in coming back to Liberty and to Fay Jerrard.

"Why don't you say something?" she asked. There was a certain roughness in her voice. "I'll go down to my room and get you a drink. Are you afraid you'll have to shoot it out with the U. S. officer?"

He had never thought of that. He raised his head, shrugged and felt the cold sweat run down his face. He knew when Fay left the room; he heard her footfalls and traced them to her quarters. This girl who had given him everything a woman could give a man and had then changed her mind about him, was going to get him a drink. At least she was interested in him enough to do that.

He saw where the trouble lay. It was in not having any friends, in being alone and he could not bear to be alone. He wished she'd come back. There was no fear in him; there was only regret. But he was too much of a philosopher to let it shake him. He finally had won his struggle. He raised himself up off the bed just as Fay came back into the room with a bottle of whiskey.

He stood there and looked at her, with the whiskey in his hand. He put the bottle to his lips, watching her dark eyes and seeing the mystery still there, and he let the fiery liquor run down his throat. It braced him but he took a little too much. He was dizzy and sat back down on the bed. The sound of the fighting in the street came back to him, louder than ever because his senses had become keener. He shut his eyes, wondering about Charley Curtis, and thinking about the boy Raymond and he wondered if Ray had bought his new boots and overalls. He wanted to see the kid; he decided he'd go to him and see what he could do to ease the boy's plight, maybe take care of him. There would be a good companion for him. He was sure he could take the kid away with him and look after him so he'd have a chance in the world.

(Continued On Page 88)

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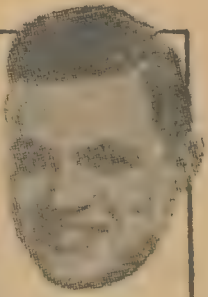

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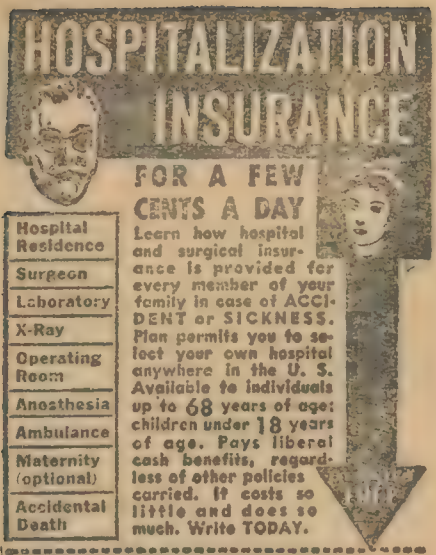
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COMPLETE COWBOY NOVEL MAGAZINE

(Continued From Page 86)

Missouri flashed into his troubled mind. He had neglected his horse in the past three hours. But he was confident Ray would give him everything he required. There, that was it, his trust in the boy, and he had never trusted anyone else.

He looked again at Fay Jerrard and she was once more at the window, peering down. He knew her skirts were not clean. If this town was wrenched away from the element that controlled it, she would be dealt with harshly unless she did something to save her face. He did not know what she could do; she had been the Red Ball owner's cohort.

The whiskey was beginning to get the best of him. He felt suddenly tired and drowsy and he wanted to lie down and shut his eyes and not open them until he was ready. He pushed his big hand over his face, spoke in a nervous voice.

"If anything ever happens to me, Fay," he said, "you see that all my money, about a thousand dollars which is in my pocket, goes to Raymond. He's a bright little fellow; all he needs is a chance. Take my horse and if Charley doesn't want him, have Raymond take him, saddle and bridle and all the gear, and tell him I said Missouri was his horse and to always take care of him. No man ever had a better friend. And in time Missouri will forget all about me and he'll grow fond of Raymond. They'll get along all right together."

"What makes you think anything's going to happen to you?" she asked curiously and coldly.

He shook his head, closed his tired eyes again. "I just know," he said, his voice thickening because of the liquor's firm hold on him.

When she spoke, her voice had a faintly rough edge. "I don't think you are doing yourself justice in letting such thoughts enter your mind."

He heard her move away from the window and stop suddenly. He dropped his head, to stare at the whiskey bottle he had placed on the

floor. He ran his hands over his face, wishing he could wake up completely and feel himself again, like he had when he had come to Liberty. But it was no go. He was all in. He looked at his costly saddle gear on the floor.

The wind had suddenly risen and flopped the window shade. The plop plop of the blind filled the room with sound. He listened and in the deep stillness of the room—perfectly still save for the rustling window shade—he caught another sound. He lived a million years in the split second that followed. He wanted to whirl up and jump away from where he sat, wanted to call out a warning. The words were in his throat, "Stop —don't be a fool—!" and then the violent explosion rocked the room, turned over the bottle of whiskey at his feet and he felt the dull impact of the slug behind his left ear. Everything was wiped out in one big burst of total blackness that engulfed him.

CHARLEY CURTIS got in on the tail end of the fight. The street and alley back of the *Paradise* were littered with the bodies of the Red Ball owlhoots and the embattled citizens who had ended their career of bloody orgies and holdups marched back to their homes and told their families that from this day on the city of Liberty, Kansas, would be one hell of a nice place to live. There would be no fear of Indians armed with rifles either.

Charley found Sheriff Tom Decker as dead as death would ever make him. He had hopped out of the doctor's office on his bandaged leg and tried to escape the Vigilantes by climbing into the saddle of a horse at the tierail. It was no go. A flying slug had mercifully searched him out and he lay half on the ground, with his right foot caught in the stirrup and his other leg resting on the imprisoned one.

Colonel W. J. Cole walked out of the *Cowboy's Home*, straight into the arms of Captain Charley Curtis.

"Upon my soul," exclaimed the

(Continued On Page 90)

★ Fighting Newspaper ★

THERE ARE numerous anecdotes about the naming of the Tombstone *Epitaph*, and since we have no sure knowledge on the subject, the interested researcher is pretty well free to pick his own. We do know that it came out on May 1, 1880, and that one of its owners, John C. Clum, later became postmaster and mayor of Tombstone.

The story I like best relates that Clum and Ed Schieffelin, (who found a fortune in silver, rather than the tombstone predicted for him, called his mine Tombstone and gave colorful names to many other mines thereafter) were fellow-passengers on the stage from Tucson to Tombstone; Clum began talking about the newspaper he was ready to start and asked for suggestions as to its name.

"The *Epitaph*," suggested Schieffelin, without hesitation. He then went on to say how a paper with this name would celebrate the town's fame and deathless deeds.

Clum seemed uncertain about the name. "But epitaphs are usually chiselled lies."

Schieffelin shrugged. "Well, they tell the truth about as often as newspapers."

So, it was the *Epitaph*, and this paper took up for the Earp brothers, who were constantly under attack in the *Nugget*, which supported Sheriff Behan. The violent temper of the press led to a duel to the death between two of the town's journalists—that is, they challenged each other, marched out to the field of honor with seconds, lethal equipment, doctors, and a swarm of spectators. But the duel never came off and the comments of onlookers, many of whom frequently backed up their talk with bullets, were hardly complimentary.

—John Lackland

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(Cointinued From Page 89)

Colonel, who was a trifle worse for wear—he had indulged in ten shots of whiskey and these had left him a little bit unsteady on his legs— "of all the men—why, Captain, how are you? And what in the devil has been taking place in this town?"

"I see your brand new rifle, Colonel," said Charley slowly. "Pity you did not know what was going on. You might have broken the gun in and might have given your usual splendid account of yourself in a close hard-fought battle. The Vigilantes have just come out from behind cover where they have been basking all these months and have succeeded in running off the renegades who have been hiding here in Liberty ever since the town was born. Of course they didn't all get away. I counted about ten dead men in the dust, lying there and waiting for their final ride to Boothill. But —I'm mighty glad to see you."

"I have been combining pleasure with business," said the Colonel. "I don't usually do that, you know." He wiped his mustache on the back of his right hand. "You remember I wrote you about the hold up in which the army payroll was taken by a lone bandit. Well, what I neglected was to describe the man to you. Nor did I tell you he was Bill Quantrill's second in command, a killer who—"

Charley listened with rapt attention and knew the Colonel was trying to tell him that the lone bandit and ex-guerilla was Bruce Lescott, his old friend. Of course the Colonel didn't know Lescott's fugitive name, but there could be no mistaking the identity of the lone outlaw—

Suddenly, as they stood there, Raymond came up and the Captain introduced him to Colonel W. J. Cole. Then the Colonel excused himself and strode across the street with his vigorous stride, and up the steps of the hotel. He turned and shouted back at Charley, "I'll be here; come over when you get through burying the dead, Captain." He laughed and entered the lamp-bright lobby.

THE MOTIVE behind the burning of the livery stable had been established and Charley had nothing but praise for the boy who had discovered it. Ten barrels of whiskey in the carriage room belonging to the real owner of the barn had been destroyed, but not before Raymond had investigated and broken into one of the containers. The remains of the barrels—four of them had not completely burned—were found in the ruins.

"I knew Mike Fanning had something to do with robbers and whiskey runners," Ray told Charley that night. "I had seen strange men unloading those barrels and I figgered right away when I saw the fire those barrels were the reason they'd burned the barn. The whiskey was for the Indians."

Charley told him he would be rewarded by Uncle Sam for his help in solving the mystery. They walked up the street from the doctor's office. Ten bodies swung from as many ropes fastened to the wooden awnings along the sidewalk and Charley looked at each corpse as he went along. He found John Howard and Tex, the gunfighter who had traveled with Stell Marshall.

"I reckon it was swift justice overtook them," Charley said. "When Bruce Lescott hears about this he'll be glad; I think he was rather fond of Stell."

Raymond nodded and tugged at his sleeve. "When you see Mister Lescott you tell him I got those new boots and overalls," he said. "I'll see him in the morning, Mister Curtis. I sure like him, don't you?"

Charley could not tell him Bruce Lescott was a fugitive and would have to be arrested as soon as they got things in order. He wanted to give the boy a talk on how some men strayed form honest paths who were good men and that crime was an exacting mistress who seldom stopped until she had destroyed her lovers.

He left Raymond who went home to sleep and rest up from his terrible experience. "I guess Mister Lescott

(Continued On Page 92)

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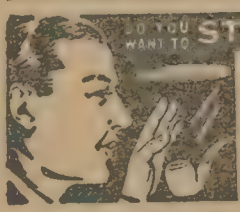

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(Continued From Page 91)

owns me now," Raymond said. "He saved my life."

"He saved mine too," Charley said warmly, as he turned in at the hotel.

CHARLEY burst into Lescott's room just in time to catch the woman who had fired the fatal bullet making preparations to leave. He wrested the gun from her hand, rushed to Lescott and found him stone dead. There was a peaceful smile on his face, a smile such as Charley had seldom seen. He was at last at peace with himself and the marshal wondered if it wasn't best he had gone like that.

He felt deeply moved and uncovered his head; then he swung round on the girl who had killed his friend.

"You did this for the reward and to save your face with the townsmen," he charged bitterly. "But you've failed; they won't hang a woman, but I'll see you go to jail for life, and I'll see you don't collect one dime of the reward." He seized her wrist and crushed it as he dragged her forward. When he had locked her in the calaboose he went out to find help in removing Lescott's body to the burial parlor.

He felt he had lost something precious, that he would never find again. The red border had taken a severe toll that night and phantoms of the dusty trails were still riding high in the spooky shadows. It was an hour later when he lay down to rest, but without success. He paced the floor of his hotel room until daybreak and then he went down the street to the *Red Moon Cafe*. He found Willa and he found her dry eyed and working.

"I might just as well do this, Charley," she said. "I warned Dad a thousand times but he wouldn't listen; he thought too much of Mike Fanning. I don't suppose you want me now and—and here's your ring."

The way he pulled her to him and held her close told her she was wrong.

* * *

It was a sad morning when they

buried Bruce Lescott. Raymond in his new boots and overalls and wearing Bruce Lescott's stiff brimmed sodbuster was with Charley. And Raymond had hold of Missouri's bridle. They stood in a light sprinkle of rain beside the grave and tears rolled down their faces. Charley wasn't ashamed of his tears. Raymond sobbed brokenly and brought the dun horse up so he could take his last look at his master.

Of course the horse did not see Bruce Lescott lying in his black coffin. Colonel W. J. Cole, who had had long experience with horses, said he was sure the dun understood that his master was dead, that he would never get to see him any more. "Besides," Cole said sadly, "a horse undergoes deep grief that stays with him a long time; in fact it is amazing how long he remembers. I don't think this splendid steed will ever forget the man who is lying down there in that coffin. He was devoted to his master. Even a dog's devotion is not as strong, as durable. I am deeply moved—"

The Colonel was really touched and stood on the verge of tears.

Charley knew more about Missouri than anyone else at the funeral. He recalled how the horse had obeyed his master's command, the stunt of putting his foot on Mike Fanning's chest and leaving it there until Lescott had told him to remove it. The Captain put his arm around Missouri's handsomely arched neck and left it there.

It was over now and the last clod had hit the top of the coffin box. They turned away and Charley heard Raymond quietly sobbing. The boy wanted to go back. The dun spooked and tore away from Raymond and, returning to the grave, pawed the mound and nickered. Never before had Charley Curtis heard such a mournful sound as Missouri made as he pawed the dirt away from the grave and thrust his nose down to the cold earth.

THEY WERE the Colonel's guests at the *Red Moon Cafe*—Charley told Ray it was a wedding

(Continued On Page 94)

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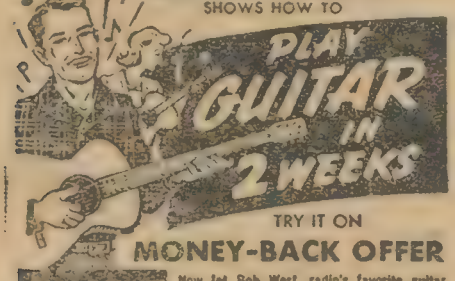

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COMPLETE COWBOY NOVEL MAGAZINE

(Continued From Page 93)

dinner. The boy smiled, understanding what he meant, and when they were about to leave the room, the kid fished out several lumps of sugar from the table bowl.

"Missouri will be watching that door when I go in," said Ray sadly. "He'll be thinking it's Mister Lescott. Then for a minute or two he will be so sad and he'll cry with them strange sounds he makes, and then he'll reach out and lick my hand and there will be something in his eyes that look like tears and he'll shake his head up and down and shy-like nibble at the sugar. It seems he says to me, 'Well, I'll eat this. I don't reckon my master will mind if I take the sugar from you. When he comes back some day—' "

Then Ray fled from the room and the boy was sobbing low in his throat, and Charley wiped the tears out of his own eyes and smiled bravely at the girl.

Willa said softly, "You liked him, too, didn't you, Charley?"

Lifting his head, Charley said sternly, "Of course I like him. I think fate handed him a rotten deal. Down beneath that rough exterior, with all his brutality and all his coldness, was a great heart, one that was different and sturdy and loyal to the things he believed in. Sure, I liked Bruce Lescott."

She smiled, too. "So did I," she said.

This was too much for the Colonel; he rose rigidly and saluting the Captain back, turned on his heel and walked out of the room. He couldn't understand why there was so much fuss over a dead renegade.

Charley had a marker made for his friend's grave. The marker said:

HERE LIES BRUCE LESCOTT, KNOWN TO THE WORLD AS WILD BILL ANDERSON.
HIS MANY GOOD DEEDS WILL BE REMEMBERED LONGER THAN HIS BAD ONES.

THE END

Don't Bet On Wimmin!

by WARD RAYMOND
(author of "Owl-hoot's Pot Luck")

It's hard to tell which is more fickle — public opinion or a woman. One day a gent's a hero, and the next . . .

THE SONORA KID'S holed up in Gridley's saloon, with the blinds drawn, and I'm wishin' I had a fast hoss under me so's I could clear out of town. But with half the citizenry crowdin' behind me, the Law (yours truly) has to put up a solid front. So I tries to drag out my gun impressive like, takes a deep breath, and goes in through the side door. The Kid's used up all his ammunition, but he has a rep for takin' guns away from lawmen, with him unarmed, and then makin' mincemeat out of them.

I'm thinkin' my minutes on this Earth is numbered, then what do I see but the Kid lurkin' behind the main door, holdin' up a chair leg for a club, just waitin' fer me to come through. I holds my breath, catfoots it over to behind him and slips my handcuffs around his wrists above his haid. He's so surprised, I have time t' wham my gun down on his haid, and after a few whams, he goes t' sleep right peaceful.

Naturally, I makes a big ruckus inside like there's a fight goin' out, holler a bit, and muss myself up, before I stagger to the door and let my fellow men see me emergin' victorious.

So my stock's gone up powerful in this here town, and I'm a full-fledged hero. I turns the Kid over to Federal Marshals, and that's that; but it's been a close shave, and I'm thinkin' it's time to retire before more such characters start showin' up here.

Even Barbara Ann Seaton, who throwed me over, has a smile for me these days, but that's water over the draw. I'm torn between Dorothy Laurens, from the dance-hall, and Julie Golschmann, who runs a first-class boardin' house in town. Both are

(Continued On Page 96)

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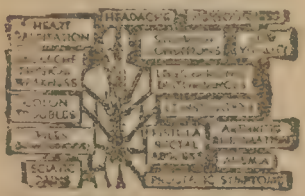

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(Continued From Page 95)

good-lookers; both is playin' up t' me since I become famous, and they both has a pretty fair stake of savin's. Trouble is, I can't decide which one I'll take.

I hear that folks are startin' t' take bets on the question, when I gets me an idea. This needs another man in it, and I figger that Abel Gridley's just crooked enough to be interested. So I puts it up t' him.

"Y'see, you have t' be thuh front man like. You take thuh bets. Meanwhile, I'll play up smart t' one of thuh two, but not neglect thuh other one completely, so's it won't look like it's all cinched. Then, you gives odds on thuh other; after enough folks has come in so that they's a nice kitty, I drops thuh one and hitches up with t' other. You take twenty-five percent and I get thuh rest."

"Oughter be an even split," grumbles Abel.

"Nope," I says; "it's my idea, and besides, I have t' do all thuh work.

"Which one is goin' t' be thuh blind?" he asks.

I ponders fer a minute, then flips a coin. "Heads, it's Dorothy; tails it's Julie." The coin comes heads. "So be it," I says. "Dorothy gets thuh heavy playin' up to, and you gives odds on Julie. Then I marries up with her."

It works like a charm. I starts payin' heavy attention t' Dorothy Laurens, but just the same lettin' Julie draw me aside every now and then and makin' like maybe I'd rather have her—but not enough so's folks 'll change their minds. The boys in town start plankin' money down on Dorothy, while I act as if I got no idea o' what's goin' on around me—like I'm just bein' led around by two females an' will fall fer the one who works hardest on me.

It ain't hard work at all. They's both sweet gals, and sometimes I wonder if I don't wish the coin had come down t' other way, because that Laurens gal sure can make a gent feel like he's the greatest man alive. On the other hand, Julie's no slouch, either; she don't pile it on quite as heavy, but one gets the feelin' that

maybe there's more to her kind of woo.

Then I learns that Ace Barlow has plunked down five thousand on the line in favor of Dorothy. Of course, I has to cover all these bets, that bein' the agreement, and I figure that it better stop there.

I goes into Gridley's t' tip him off on stoppin' the bets, because I'm goin' t' propose t' Julie tonight. They's lots of customers around, so I waits fer a chance to get Abel into his private room where we can talk turkey.

That's when this stranger barges in. "Where's that two-bit tin-badge?" he starts off. It seems like he's a friend of the Sonora Kid, and his remarks t' me are downright impolite. I musters up my dignity, but he snakes out his guns. "Great lawdawg, huh? Well, let's see how much sand yuh got in yore crew, mister. I'll give yuh an even break."

I tries t' reason with him, but it ain't no use. Somehow he has the idea that the Law (that's me, goldang it) is afeared of him, an' the worst part of it is that he's right.

But it's downright mortifyin' when, instead of pluggin' me, he makes me take off my britches and walk across the street t' my office with my red underwear showin' a mile, my hands up, and a glass of beer balanced on my haid. "Spill one drop uh that, an' yuh get planted," he growls.

And just about everybody in town, includin' the two gals, is right out there, watchin' the show.

Right by the office, I stumbles and I figger my last moment is come. The glass slips off'n my haid but somehow I manages t' catch it. Only I slips forward an' the beer splashes right into this gun-tough's face. He throws up a hand and his gun wavers; right then and there somethin' bounces off'n his haid, and he goes down like he was pole-axed. I'll be goldurned if 'n it ain't an iron skillet that slugged him, thrown by one Julie Golschmann.

I makes the best of the situation, and manages to collect his hardware and apply my handcuffs before he comes around. Then I remembers that I'll still without my britches, so makes a hasty withdrawl t' get myself dressed.

When I steps out of the office, there's Dorothy lookin' at me like I was some species of lizard. That gal has heard just about all the uncomplimentary remarks ever thought of durin' her career in the dance-hall, and she remembers each and every one. I'm tryin' t' get my breath and make some sort of soothin' comment, when a hand grabs Dorothy's hair and yanks. A minute later, the two gals are sluggin' it out right there in front of my office, with Julie takin' exception t' Dorothy's opinion of the Law.

I manages to separate them, and learns that it's better t' tangle with wildcats than two wimmin at each other. Looks like as if they was both fightin' me. I staggers back into my office and sinks into a chair.

Then I feels soft hands on my face, and someone's applyin' liniment and such t' me. It's Julie and she's downright repentant.

"I don't care what they think, Horatius Dingle," she says. "Only a fool would have tried to draw against that man when he had the drop on you. And I don't want to marry a fighting fool, who'll leave me a widow in no time at all. You let someone else wear that star..." This goes on for quite a spell before I get the idea that she's proposin' to me and wants me to become a peaceful citizen.

So I'm walkin' on air when I goes back into the saloon, even though opinion on me is divided t' say the least. "Julie and me is gettin' hitched," I tells Abel.

Gridley looks so downright mournful I think he's goin' t' bust into tears. He beckons me into his office and stands there shakin' his haid. "What's thuh trouble," I want to know. "It worked out just like we planned. We get thuh kitty."

Abel shakes his haid. "Aw hell," he says, "yuh and Dorothy looked so sure-fire t' me I thought yuh'd fallen plumb in love.... So I offered 'em all double or nothin' on a switch in thuh bets. I figgered sure yuh was goin' to marry that Laurens gal."

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